CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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BOOKS

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THE ABOMINATIONS OF YONDO

Overland Monthly, **April 1926**

The sand of the desert of Yondo is not as the sand of other deserts; for Yondo lies nearest of all to the world's rim; and strange winds, blowing from a pit no astronomer may hope to fathom, have sown its ruinous fields with the gray dust of corroding planets, the black ashes of extinguished suns. The dark, orblike mountains which rise from its wrinkled and pitted plain are not all its own, for some are fallen asteroids half-buried in that abysmal sand. Things have crept in from nether space, whose incursion is forbid by the gods of all proper and well-ordered lands; but there are no such gods in Yondo, where live the hoary genii of stars abolished, and decrepit demons left homeless by the destruction of antiquated hells.

It was noon of a vernal day when I came forth from that interminable cactus-forest in which the Inquisitors of Ong had left me, and saw at my feet the gray beginnings of Yondo. I repeat, it was noon of a vernal day; but in that fantastic wood I had found no token or memory of a spring; and the swollen, fulvous, dying and half-rotten growths through which I had pushed my way, were like no other cacti, but bore shapes of abomination scarcely to be described. The very air was heavy with stagnant odours of decay; and leprous lichens mottled the black soil and russet vegetation with increasing frequency. Pale-green vipers lifted their heads from prostrate cactus-boles and watched me with eyes of bright ochre that had no lids or pupils. These things had disquieted me for hours past; and I did not like the monstrous fungi, with hueless stems and nodding heads of poisonous mauve, which grew from the sodden lips of fetid tarns; and the sinister ripples spreading and fading on the yellow water at my approach were not reassuring to one whose nerves were still taut from unmentionable tortures. Then, when even the blotched and sickly cacti became more sparse and stunted, and rills of ashen sand crept in among them, I began to suspect how great was the hatred my heresy had aroused in the priests of Ong; and to guess the ultimate malignancy of their vengeance.

I will not detail the indiscretions which had led me, a careless stranger from far-off lands, into the power of those dreadful magicians and

mysteriarchs who serve the lion-headed Ong. These indiscretions, and the particulars of my arrest, are painful to remember; and least of all do I like to remember the racks of dragon-gut strewn with powdered adamant, on which men are stretched naked; or that unlit room with six-inch windows near the sill, where bloated corpse worms crawled in by hundreds from a neighboring catacomb. Sufficient to say that, after expending the resources of their frightful fantasy, my inquisitors had borne me blindfolded on camel-back for incomputable hours, to leave me at morning twilight in that sinister forest. I was free, they told me, to go whither I would; and in token of the clemency of Ong, they gave me a loaf of coarse bread and a leathern bottle of rank water by way of provision. It was at noon of the same day that I came to the desert of Yondo.

So far, I had not thought of turning back, for all the horror of those rotting cacti, or the evil things that dwelt among them. Now, I paused, knowing the abominable legend of the land to which I had come; for Yondo is a place where few have ventured wittingly and of their own accord. Fewer still have returned—babbling of unknown horrors and strange treasure; and the lifelong palsy which shakes their withered limbs, together with the mad gleam in their starting eyes beneath whitened brows and lashes, is not an incentive for others to follow. So it was that I hesitated on the verge of those ashen sands, and felt the tremor of a new fear in my wrenched vitals. It was dreadful to go on, and dreadful to go back, for I felt sure that the priests had made provision against the latter contingency. So after a little I went forward, sinking at each step in loathly softness, and followed by certain long-legged insects that I had met among the cacti. These insects were the color of a week-old corpse and were as large as tarantulas; but when I turned and trod upon the foremost, a mephitic stench arose that was more nauseous even than their color. So, for the nonce, I ignored them as much as possible.

Indeed, such things were minor horrors in my predicament. Before me, under a huge sun of sickly scarlet, Yondo reached interminable as the land of a hashish-dream against the black heavens. Far-off, on the utmost rim, were those orblike mountains of which I have told; but in between were awful blanks of gray desolation, and low, treeless hills like the backs of half-buried monsters. Struggling on, I saw great pits where meteors had sunk from sight; and divers-colored jewels that I could not name glared or

glistened from the dust. There were fallen cypresses that rotted by crumbling mausoleums, on whose lichen blotted marble fat chameleons crept with royal pearls in their mouths. Hidden by the low ridges, were cities of which no stela remained unbroken—immense and immemorial cities lapsing shard by shard, atom by atom, to feed infinities of desolation. I dragged my torture-weakened limbs over vast rubbish-heaps that had once been mighty temples; and fallen gods frowned in rotting psammite or leered in riven porphyry at my feet. Over all was an evil silence, broken only by the satanic laughter of hyenas, and the rustling of adders in thickets of dead thorn or antique gardens given to the perishing nettle and fumitory.

Topping one of the many moundlike ridges, I saw the waters of a weird lake, unfathomably dark and green as malachite, and set with bars of profulgent salt. These waters lay far beneath me in a cuplike hollow; but almost at my feet on the wave-worn slopes were heaps of that ancient salt; and I knew that the lake was only the bitter and ebbing dregs of some former sea. Climbing down, I came to the dark waters, and began to lave my hands; but there was a sharp and corrosive sting in that immemorial brine, and I desisted quickly, preferring the desert dust that had wrapped me about like a slow shroud.

Here I decided to rest for a little; and hunger forced me to consume part of the meager and mocking fare with which I had been provided by the priests. It was my intention to push on if my strength would allow and reach the lands that lie to the north of Yondo. Theses lands are desolate, indeed, but their desolation is of a more usual order than that of Yondo; and certain tribes of nomads have been known to visit them occasionally. If fortune favored me, I might fall in with one of these tribes.

The scant fare revived me, and, for the first time in weeks of which I had lost all reckoning, I heard the whisper of a faint hope. The corpse-colored insects had long since ceased to follow me; and so far despite the eeriness of the sepulchral silence and the mounded dust of timeless ruin, I had met nothing half so horrible as those insects. I began to think that the terrors of Yondo were somewhat exaggerated.

It was then that I heard a diabolic chuckle on the hillside above me. The sound began with a sharp abruptness that startled me beyond all reason, and continued endlessly, never varying its single note, like the mirth of an idiotic demon. I turned, and saw the mouth of a dark cave fanged with

green stalactites, which I had not perceived before. The sound appeared to come from within this cave.

With a fearful intentness I stared at the black opening. The chuckle grew louder, but for awhile I could see nothing. At last I caught a whitish glimmer in the darkness; then, with all the rapidity of nightmare, a monstrous Thing emerged. It had a pale, hairless, egg-shaped body, large as that of a gravid she-goat; and this body was mounted on nine long wavering legs with many flanges, like the legs of some enormous spider. The creature ran past me to the water's edge; and I saw that there were no eyes in its oddly sloping face; but two knifelike ears rose high above its head, and a thin, wrinkled snout hung down across its mouth, whose flabby lips, parted in that eternal chuckle, revealed rows of bats' teeth.

It drank avidly of the bitter lake; then, with thirst satisfied, it turned and seemed to sense my presence, for the wrinkled snout rose and pointed toward me, sniffing audibly. Whether the creature would have fled, or whether it meant to attack me, I do not know; for I could bear the sight no longer but ran with trembling limbs amid the massive boulders and great bars of salt along the lakeshore.

Utterly breathless, I stopped at last, and saw that I was not pursued. I sat down, still trembling, in the shadow of a boulder. But I was to find little respite, for now began the second of those bizarre adventures which forced me to believe all the mad legends I had heard.

More startling even than that diabolic chuckle was the scream that rose at my very elbow, from the salt-compounded sand—the scream of a woman possessed by some atrocious agony, or helpless in the grip of devils. Turning, I beheld a veritable Venus, naked in a white perfection that could fear no scrutiny, but immersed to her navel in the sand. Her terror-widened eyes implored me and her lotus hands reached out with beseeching gesture. I sprang to her side—and touched a marble statue, whose carven lids were drooped in some enigmatic dream of dead cycles, and whose hands were buried with the lost loveliness of hips and thighs. Again I fled, shaken with a new fear; and again I heard the scream of a woman's agony. But this time I did not turn to see the imploring eyes and hands.

Up the long slope to the north of that accursed lake stumbling over boulders of basanite and ledges that were sharp with verdigris-covered metals; floundering in pits of salt, on terraces wrought by the receding tide

in ancient æons, I fled as a man flies from dream to baleful dream of some cacodemoniacal night. At whiles there was a cold whisper in my ear, which did not come from the wind of my flight; and looking back as I reached one of the upper terraces, I perceived a singular shadow that ran pace by pace with my own. This shadow was not the shadow of man nor ape nor any known beast; the head was too grotesquely elongated, the squat body too gibbous; and I was unable to determine whether the shadow possessed five legs, or whether what appeared to be the fifth was merely a tail.

Terror lent me new strength, and I had reached the hilltop when I dared to look back again. But still the fantastic shadow kept pace by pace with mine; and now I caught a curious and utterly sickening odour, foul as the odour of bats who have hung in a charnel-house amid the mould of corruption. I ran for leagues, while the red sun slanted above the asteroidal mountains to the west; and the weird shadow lengthened with mine but kept always at the same distance behind me.

An hour before sunset I came to a circle of small pillars that rose miraculously unbroken amid ruins that were like a vast pile of potsherds. As I passed among these pillars I heard a whimper, like the whimper of some fierce animal, between rage and fear, and saw that the shadow had not followed me within the circle. I stopped and waited, conjecturing at once that I had found a sanctuary my unwelcome familiar would not dare to enter; and in this the action of the shadow confirmed me, for the Thing hesitated, then ran about the circle of columns, pausing often between them; and, whimpering all the while, at last went away and disappeared in the desert toward the setting sun.

For a full half hour I did not dare to move; then, the imminence of night, with all its probabilities of fresh terror, urged me to push on as far as I could to the north. For I was now in the very heart of Yondo where demons or phantoms might dwell who would not respect the sanctuary of the unbroken columns.

Now, as I toiled on, the sunlight altered strangely; for the red orb, nearing the mounded horizon, sank and smouldered in a belt of miasmal haze, where floating dust from all the shattered fanes and necropoli of Yondo was mixed with evil vapors coiling skyward from black enormous gulfs lying beyond the utmost rim of the world. In that light, the entire

waste, the rounded mountains, the serpentine hills, the lost cities, were drenched with phantasmal and darkening scarlet.

Then, out of the north, where shadows mustered, there came a curious figure—a tall man fully caparisoned in chain-mail—or, rather, what I assumed to be a man. As the figure approached me, clanking dismally at each step on the sharded ground, I saw that its armour was of brass mottled with verdigris; and a casque of the same metal furnished with coiling horns and a serrate comb, rose high above its head. I say its head, for the sunset was darkening, and I could not see clearly at any distance; but when the apparition came abreast, I perceived that there was no face beneath the brows of the bizarre helmet whose empty edges were outlined for a moment against the smouldering light. Then the figure passed on, still clanking dismally, and vanished.

But on its heels, ere the sunset faded, there came a second apparition, striding with incredible strides and halting when it loomed almost upon me in the red twilight—the monstrous mummy of some ancient king, still crowned with untarnished gold, but turning to my gaze a visage that more than time or the worm had wasted. Broken swathings flapped about the skeleton legs, and above the crown that was set with sapphires and orange rubies, a black Something swayed and nodded horribly; but, for an instant, I did not dream what it was. Then, in its middle, two oblique and scarlet eyes opened and glowed like hellish coals, and two ophidian fangs glittered in an apelike mouth. A squat, furless, shapeless head on a neck of disproportionate extent leaned unspeakably down and whispered in the mummy's ear. Then, with one stride, the titanic lich took half the distance between us, and from out the folds of the tattered sere-cloth a gaunt arm arose, and fleshless, taloned fingers laden with glowering gems, reached out and fumbled for my throat…

Back, back through æons of madness and dread, in a prone, precipitate flight, I ran from those fumbling fingers that hung always on the dusk behind me, back, back forever, unthinking, unhesitating, to all the abominations I had left; back in the thickening twilight toward the nameless and sharded ruins, the haunted lake, the forest of evil cacti, and the cruel and cynical inquisitors of Ong who waited my return.

THE THIRD EPISODE OF VATHEK

***Leaves*, Summer 1937.**

The Story of the Princess Zulkaïs and the Prince Kalilah, by William Beckford and Clark Ashton Smith

My Father, lord, can scarcely be unknown to you, inasmuch as the Caliph Motassem had entrusted to his care the fertile province of Masre. Nor would he have been unworthy of his exalted position if, in view of man's ignorance and weakness, an inordinate desire to control the future were not to be accounted an unpardonable error.

The Émir Abou Taher Achmed, however—for such was my father's name—was very far from recognizing this truth. Only too often did he seek to forestall Providence, and to direct the course of events in spite of the decrees of Heaven. Ah! Terrible indeed are those decrees! Sooner or later their accomplishment is sure! Vainly do we seek to oppose them!

During a long course of years, everything flourished under my father's rule, and among the Émirs who have successfully administered that beautiful province, Abou Taher Achmed will not be forgotten. Following his speculative bent, he enlisted the services of certain experienced Nubians, born near the sources of the Nile, who had studied the stream throughout its course, and knew all its characteristics, and the properties of its waters; and, with their aid, he carried out his impious design of regulating the overflow of the river. Thus he covered the country with a too luxuriant vegetation, which left it afterwards exhausted. The people, always slaves to outward appearances, applauded his enterprises, worked indefatigably at the unnumbered canals with which he intersected the land, and, blinded by his successes, passed lightly over any unfortunate circumstances accompanying them. If, out of every ten ships that he sent forth to traffic, according to his fancy, a single ship came back richly freighted after a successful voyage, the wreck of the other nine was counted for nothing. Moreover, as, owing to his care and vigilance, commerce prospered under his rule, he was himself deceived as to his losses, and took to himself all the glory of his gains.

Soon Abou Taher Achmed came to be convinced that if he could recover the arts and sciences of the ancient Egyptians, his power would be unbounded. He believed that, in the remote ages of antiquity, men had appropriated to their own use some rays of the divine wisdom, and thus been enabled to work marvels, and he did not despair of bringing back once again that glorious time. For this purpose he caused search to be made, among the ruins abounding in the country, for the mysterious tablets which, according to the report of the Sages who swarmed in his court, would show how the arts and sciences in question were to be acquired, and also indicate the means of discovering hidden treasures, and subduing the Intelligences by which those treasures were guarded. Never before his time had any Mussulman puzzled his brains over hieroglyphics. Now, however, search was made, on his behalf, for hieroglyphics of every kind, in all quarters, in the remotest provinces, the strange symbols being faithfully copied on linen cloths. I have seen these cloths a thousand times, stretched out on the roofs of our palace. Nor could bees be more busy and assiduous about a bed of flowers than were the Sages about these painted sheets. But, as each Sage entertained a different opinion as to the meaning of what was there depicted, arguments were frequent, and quarrels ensued. Not only did the Sages spend the hours of daylight in prosecuting their researches, but the moon often shed its beams upon them while so occupied. They did not dare to light torches upon the terraced roofs, for fear of alarming the faithful Mussulmans, who were beginning to blame my father’s veneration for an idolatrous antiquity, and regarded all these painted symbols, these figures, with a pious horror.

Meanwhile, the Émir, who would never have thought of neglecting any real matter of business however unimportant, for the pursuit of his strange studies, was by no means so particular with regard to his religious observances, and often forgot to perform the ablutions ordained by the law. The women of his harem did not fail to perceive this, but were afraid to speak, as, for one reason and another, their influence had considerably waned. But, on a certain day, Shaban, the chief of the eunuchs, who was very old and very pious, presented himself before his master, holding a ewer and golden basin, and said: “The waters of the Nile have been given for the cleansing of all our impurities; their source is in the clouds of

heaven, not in the temples of idols; take and use those waters, for you stand in need of them."

The Émir, duly impressed by the action and speech of Shaban, yielded to his just remonstrances, and, instead of unpacking a large bale of painted cloths, which had just arrived from a far distance, ordered the eunuch to serve the day's collation in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and to assemble there all his slaves, and all his birds—of which he kept a large number in aviaries of sandalwood.

Immediately the palace rang to the sound of instruments of music, and groups of slaves appeared, all dressed in their most attractive garments, and each leading in leash a peacock whiter than snow. One only of these slaves —whose slender and graceful form was a delight to the eye—had no bird in leash, and kept her veil down.

"Why this eclipse?" said the Émir to Shaban.

"Lord," answered he with joyful mien, "I am better than all your astrologers, for it is I who have discovered this lovely star. But do not imagine that she is yet within your reach; her father, the holy and venerable Iman Abzenderoud, will never consent to make you happy in the possession of her charms unless you perform your ablutions with greater regularity, and give the go-by to the Sages and their hieroglyphics."

My father, without replying to Shaban, ran to snatch away the veil that hid the countenance of Ghulendi Begum—for such was the name of Abzenderoud's daughter—and he did so with such violence that he nearly crushed two peacocks, and overturned several baskets of flowers. To this sudden heat succeeded a kind of ecstatic stupor. At last he cried: "How beautiful she is, how divine! Go, fetch at once the Iman of Soussouf—let the nuptial chamber be got ready, and all necessary preparations for our marriage be complete within one hour!"

"But, Lord," said Shaban, in consternation, "you forget that Ghulendi Begum cannot marry you without the consent of her father, who makes it a condition that you should abandon.…"

"What nonsense are you talking?" interrupted the Émir. "Do you think I am fool enough not to prefer this young virgin, fresh as the dew of the morning, to cartloads of hieroglyphics, mouldy and of the color of dead ashes? As to Abzenderoud, go and fetch him if you like—but quickly, for I shall certainly not wait a moment longer than I please."

“Hasten, Shaban,” said Ghulendi Begum modestly, “hasten; you see that I am not here in case to make any very effectual resistance.”

“It’s my fault,” mumbled the eunuch as he departed, “but I shall do what I can to rectify my error.”

Accordingly he flew to find Abzenderoud. But that faithful servant of Allah had gone from home very early in the morning, and sought the open fields in order to pursue his pious investigations into the growth of plants and the life of insects. A deathlike pallor overspread his countenance when he saw Shaban swooping down upon him like a raven of ill omen, and heard him tell, in broken accents, how the Émir had promised nothing, and how he himself might well arrive too late to exact the pious conditions he had so deeply pondered. Nevertheless, the Iman did not lose courage, and reached my father’s palace in a very few moments; but unfortunately he was by this time so out of breath that he sank down on a sofa, and remained for over an hour panting and breathless.

While all the eunuchs were doing their best to revive the holy man, Shaban had quickly gone up to the apartment assigned to Abou Taher Achmed’s pleasures; but his zeal suffered some diminution when he saw the door guarded by two black eunuchs, who, brandishing their sabres, informed him that if he ventured to take one more step forward, his head would roll at his own feet. Therefore he had nothing better to do than to return to Abzenderoud, whose gaspings he regarded with wild and troubled eyes, lamenting the while over his own imprudence in bringing Ghulendi Begum within the Émir’s power.

Notwithstanding the care my father was taking for the entertainment of the new sultana, he had heard something of the dispute between the black eunuchs and Shaban, and had a fair notion of what was going on. As soon, therefore, as he judged it convenient, he came to find Abzenderoud in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and presenting Ghulendi Begum to the holy man assured him that, while awaiting his arrival, he, the Émir, had made her his wife.

At these words, the Iman uttered a lamentable and piercing cry, which relieved the pressure on his chest; and, rolling his eyes in a fearful manner, he said to the new sultana: “Wretched woman, dost thou not know that rash and ill-considered acts lead ever to a miserable end? Thy father would have made thy lot secure; but thou hast not awaited the result of his efforts, or

rather it is Heaven itself that mocks all human previsions. I ask nothing more of the Émir; let him deal with thee, and with his hieroglyphics, as he deems best! I foresee untold evils in the future; but I shall not be there to witness them. Rejoice for a while, intoxicated with thy pleasures. As for me, I call to my aid the Angel of Death, and hope, within three days, to rest in peace in the bosom of our great Prophet!"

After saying these words, he rose to his feet, tottering. His daughter strove in vain to hold him back. He tore his robe from her trembling hands. She fell fainting to the ground, and while the distracted Émir was striving to bring her back again to her senses, the obstinate Abzenderoud went muttering from the room.

At first it was thought that the holy man would not keep his vow quite literally, and would suffer himself to be comforted; but such was not the case. On reaching his own house, he began by stopping his ears with cotton wool, so as not to hear the clamor and adjuration of his friends; and then, having seated himself on the mats in his cell, with his legs crossed, and his head in his hands, he remained in that posture speechless, and taking no food; and finally, at the end of three days, expired according to his prayer. He was buried magnificently, and during the obsequies Shaban did not fail to manifest his grief by slashing his flesh without mercy, and soaking the earth with little rivulets of his blood; after which, having caused balm to be applied to his wounds, he returned to the duties of his office.

Meanwhile, the Émir had no small difficulty in assuaging the despair of Ghulendi Begum, and often cursed the hieroglyphics which had been its first efficient cause. At last his attentions touched the heart of the sultana. She regained her ordinary equability of spirits, and became pregnant; and everything returned to its accustomed order.

The Émir, his mind always dwelling on the magnificence of the ancient Pharaohs, built, after their manner, a palace with twelve pavilions—proposing, at an early date, to install in each pavilion a son. Unfortunately, his wives brought forth nothing but daughters. At each new birth he grumbled, gnashed his teeth, accused Mahomet of being the cause of his mishaps, and would have been altogether unbearable, if Ghulendi Begum had not found means to moderate his evil temper. She induced him to come every night into her apartment, where, by a thousand ingenious devices, she

succeeded in introducing fresh air, while, in other parts of the palace, the atmosphere was stifling.

During her pregnancy my father never left the dais on which she reclined. This dais was set on a large and long gallery overlooking the Nile, and so disposed as to seem about on a level with the stream,—so close, too, that anyone reclining upon it could throw into the water the seeds of any pomegranate he might be eating. The best dancers, the most excellent magicians, were always about the palace. Every night pantomimes were performed to the light of a thousand golden lamps—lamps placed upon the floor so as to bring out the fineness and grace of the performers' feet. The dancers themselves cost my father immense sums in golden-fringed slippers and sandals a-glitter with jewelry; and, indeed, when they were all in motion together the effect was dazzling.

But notwithstanding this accumulation of splendors, the sultana passed very unhappy days on her dais. With the same indifference that a poor wretch tormented by sleeplessness watches the scintillations of the stars, so did she see pass before her eyes all this whirl of performers in their brilliancy and charm. Anon she would think of the wrath, that seemed almost prophetic, of her venerable father; anon she would deplore his strange and untimely end. A thousand times she would interrupt the choir of singers, crying: "Fate has decreed my ruin! Heaven will not vouchsafe me a son, and my husband will banish me from his sight!" The torment of her mind intensified the pain and discomfort attendant on her condition. My father, thereupon, was so greatly perturbed that, for the first time in his life, he made appeal to Heaven, and ordered prayers to be offered up in every mosque. Nor did he omit the giving of alms, for he caused it to be publicly announced that all beggars were to assemble in the largest court of the palace, and would there be served with rice, each according to his individual appetite. There followed such a crush every morning at the palace gates that the incomers were nearly suffocated. Mendicants swarmed in from all parts, by land, and by river. Whole villages would come down the stream on rafts. And the appetites of all were enormous; for the buildings which my father had erected, his costly pursuit of hieroglyphics, and his maintenance of the Sages, had caused some scarcity throughout the land.

Among those who came from a very far distance was a man of an extreme age, and great singularity, by name Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the hermit of the Great Sandy Desert. He was eight feet high, so ill-proportioned, and of a leanness so extreme, that he looked like a skeleton, and was hideous to behold. Nevertheless, this lugubrious and forbidden piece of human mechanism enshrined the most benevolent and religious spirit in the universe. With a voice of thunder he proclaimed the will of the Prophet, and said openly it was a pity that a prince who distributed rice to the poor, and in such great profusion, should be a lover of hieroglyphics. People crowded around him—the Imans, the Mullahs, the Muezins, did nothing but sing his praises. His feet, though ingrained with the sand of his native desert, were freely kissed. Nay, the very grains of the sand from his feet were gathered up, and treasured in caskets of amber.

One day he proclaimed the truth and the horror of the sciences of evil, in a voice so loud and resonant that the great standards set before the palace trembled. The terrible sound penetrated into the interior of the harem. The women and the eunuchs fainted away in the Hall of the Golden Trellises; the dancers stood with one foot arrested in the air; the mummers had not the courage to pursue their antics; the musicians suffered their instruments to fall to the ground; and Ghulendi Begum thought to die of fright as she lay on her dais.

Abou Taher Achmed stood astounded. His conscience smote him for his idolatrous proclivities, and during a few remorseful moments he thought that the Avenging Angel had come to turn him into stone—and not himself only but the people committed to his charge.

After standing for some time, upright, with arms uplifted, in the Gallery of the Daises, he called Shaban to him, and said: “The sun has not lost its brightness, the Nile flows peacefully in its bed, what means then this supernatural cry that has just resounded through my palace?”

“Lord,” answered the pious eunuch, “this voice is the voice of Truth, and is spoken to you through the mouth of the venerable Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the Hermit of the Sandy Desert, the most faithful, the most zealous, of the servants of the Prophet, who has, in nine days, journeyed three hundred leagues to make proof of your hospitality, and to impart to you the knowledge with which he is inspired. Do not neglect the teachings of a man who in wisdom, in piety, and in stature, surpasses the most

enlightened, the most devout, and the most gigantic of the inhabitants of earth. All your people are in an ecstasy. Trade is at a standstill. The inhabitants of the city hasten to hear him, neglecting their wonted assemblies in the public gardens. The story-tellers are without hearers at the margins of the public fountains. Joussouf himself was not wiser than he, and had no greater knowledge of the future."

At these last words, the Émir was suddenly smitten with the desire of consulting Abou Gabdolle with regard to his family affairs, and particularly with regard to the great projects he entertained for the future advantage of his sons, who were not yet born. He deemed himself happy in being thus able to consult a living prophet; for, so far, it was only in the form of mummies that he had been brought into relation with these inspired personages. He resolved, therefore, to summon into his presence, nay, into his very harem, the extraordinary being now in question. Would not the Pharaohs have so dealt with the necromancers of their time, and was not he determined, in all circumstances, to follow the Pharaohs' example? He therefore graciously directed Shaban to go and fetch the holy man.

Shaban, transported with joy, hastened to communicate this invitation to the hermit, who, however, did not appear to be as much charmed by the summons as were the people at large. These latter filled the air with their acclamations, while Abou Gabdolle stood still, with his hands clasped, and his eyes uplifted to heaven, in a prophetic trance. From time to time he uttered the deepest sighs, and, after, remaining long rapt in holy contemplation, shouted out, in his voice of thunder: "Allah's will be done! I am but his creature. Eunuch, I am ready to follow thee. But let the doors of the palace be broken down. It is not meet for the servants of the Most High to bend their heads."

The people needed no second command. They all set hands to the work with a will, and in an instant the gateway, a piece of the most admirable workmanship, was utterly ruined.

At the sound of the breaking in of the doors, piercing cries arose within the harem. Abou Taher Achmed began to repent of his curiosity. Nevertheless, he ordered, though somewhat reluctantly, that the passages into the harem should be laid open to the holy giant, for he feared lest the enthusiastic adherents of the prophet should penetrate into the apartments occupied by the women, and containing the princely treasures. These fears

were, however, vain, for the holy man had sent back his devout admirers. I have been assured that on their all kneeling to receive his blessing he said to them, in tones of the deepest solemnity: “Retire, remain peacefully in your dwellings, and be assured that, whatever happens, Abou Gabdolle Guehaman is prepared for every emergency.” Then, turning towards the palace, he cried: “O domes of dazzling brilliancy, receive me, and may nothing ensue to tarnish your splendor.”

Meanwhile, everything had been made ready within the harem. Screens had been duly ordered, the door-curtains had been drawn, and ample draperies hung before the daises in the long gallery that ran round the interior of the building—thus concealing from view the sultanas, and the princesses, their daughters.

Such elaborate preparations had caused a general ferment; and curiosity was at its height, when the hermit, trampling under foot the ruined fragments of the doorways, entered majestically into the Hall of the Golden Trellises. The magnificence of the palace did not even win from him a passing glance, his eyes remained fixed, mournfully, on the pavement at his feet. At last he penetrated into the great gallery of the women. These latter, who were not at all accustomed to the sight of creatures so lean, gaunt, and gigantic, uttered piercing cries, and loudly asked for essences and cordials to enable them to bear up against the apparition of such a phantasm.

The hermit paid not the smallest heed to the surrounding tumult. He was gravely pursuing his way, when the Émir came forward, and, taking him by the skirt of his garment, led him, with much ceremony, to the dais of the gallery which looked out upon the Nile. Basins of comfits and orthodox liquors were at once served; but though Abou Gabdolle Guehaman seemed to be dying of hunger, he refused to partake of these refreshments, saying that for ninety years he had drunk nothing but the dew of heaven, and eaten only the locusts of the desert. The Émir, who regarded this diet as conformable to what might properly be expected of a prophet, did not press him further, but at once entered into the question he had at heart, saying how much it grieved him to be without a male heir, notwithstanding all the prayers offered up to that effect, and the flattering hopes which the Imans had given him. “But now,” he continued, “I am assured that this happiness will at last be mine. The Sages, the mediciners, predict it, and my own observations confirm their prognostications. It is not, therefore, with the

purpose of consulting you with regard to the future that I have caused you to be summoned. It is for the purpose of obtaining your advice upon the education I should give to the son whose birth I am expecting or rather, to the two sons, for, without doubt, in recognition of my alms, Heaven will accord to the Sultana Ghulendi Begum a double measure of fertility, seeing that she is twice as large as women usually are on such occasions."

Without answering a word, the hermit mournfully shook his head three times.

My father, greatly astonished, asked if his anticipated good fortune was in any wise displeasing to the holy man.

"Ah! Too blind prince," replied the hermit, uttering a cavernous sigh that seemed to issue from the grave itself, "why importune Heaven with rash prayers? Respect its decrees! It knows what is best for all men better than they do themselves. Woe be to you, and woe be to the son whom you will doubtless compel to follow in the perverse ways of your own beliefs, instead of submitting himself humbly to the guidance of Providence. If the great of this world could only foresee all the misfortunes they bring upon themselves, they would tremble in the midst of their splendor. Pharaoh recognized this truth, but too late. He pursued the children of Moussa despite the divine decrees, and died the death of the wicked. What can alms avail when the heart is in rebellion? Instead of asking the Prophet for an heir, to be led by you into the paths of destruction, those who have your welfare at heart should implore him to cause Ghulendi Begum to die—yes, to die before she brings into the world presumptuous creatures, whom your conduct will precipitate into the abyss! Once again I call upon you to submit. If Allah's angel threatens to cut short the days of the sultana, do not make appeal to your magicians to ward off the fatal blow: let it fall, let her die! Tremble not with wrath, Émir; harden not your heart! Once again call to mind the fate of Pharaoh and the waters that swallowed him up!"

"Call them to mind yourself!" cried my father, foaming with rage, and springing from the dais to run to the aid of the sultana, who, having heard all, had fainted away behind the curtains. "Remember that the Nile flows beneath these windows, and that thou hast well deserved that thy odious carcass should be hurled into its waters!"

"I fear not," cried the gigantic hermit in turn; "the prophet of Allah fears naught but himself," and he rose on the tips of his toes and touched with his

hands the supports of the dome of the apartment.

“Ha ha! Thou fearest nothing,” cried all the women and eunuchs, issuing like tigers out of their den. “Accursed assassin, thou hast just brought our beloved mistress to death’s door, and yet fearest nothing! Go, and become food for the monsters of the river!” Screaming out these words, they threw themselves, all at once, on Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, bore him down, strangled him without pity, and cast his body through a dark grating into the Nile, which there lost itself obscurely among the piers of iron.

The Émir, astonished by an act at once so sudden and so atrocious, remained with his eyes fixed on the waters; but the body did not again come to the surface; and Shaban, who now appeared upon the scene, bewildered him with his cries. At last he turned to look upon the perpetrators of the crime; but they had scattered in every direction, and hidden behind the curtains of the gallery, each avoiding the other, they were all overwhelmed by the thought of what they had done.

Ghulendi, who had only come to herself in time to witness this scene of horror, was now in mortal anguish. Her convulsions, her agonizing cries, drew the Émir to her side. He bedewed her hand with tears. She opened her eyes wildly, and cried: “O Allah! Allah! Put an end to a wretched creature who has already lived only too long, since she has been the cause of so terrible an outrage, and suffer not that she should bring into the world—”

“Stop, stop,” interrupted the Émir, holding her hands which she was about to turn against herself, “thou shalt not die, and my children shall yet live to give the lie to that demented skeleton, worthy only of contempt. Let my Sages be summoned instantly. Let them use all their art to keep thy soul from flitting hence and to save from harm the fruit of thy body.”

The Sages were convened accordingly. They demanded that one of the courts in the palace should be placed entirely at their disposal, and there began their operations, kindling a fire whose light penetrated into the gallery. The sultana rose from her couch, notwithstanding all the efforts made to restrain her, and ran to the balcony overlooking the Nile. The view from thence was lonely and drear. Not a single boat showed upon the surface of the stream. In the distance were discernible reaches of sand which the wind, from time to time, sent whirling into the air. The rays of the setting sun dyed the waters blood-red. Scarcely had the deepening twilight stretched over the horizon, when a sudden and furious wind broke the open

lattice-work of the gallery. The sultana, beside herself, her heart beating, tried to plunge back into the interior of the apartment, but an irresistible power held her where she was, and forced her, against her will, to contemplate the mournful scene before her eyes. A great silence now reigned. Darkness had insensibly covered the earth. Then suddenly a streak of blue light furrowed the clouds in the direction of the pyramids. The princess could distinguish their enormous mass against the horizon as clearly as if it had been noonday. The spectacle thus suddenly revealed, chilled her with fear. Several times did she try to call her slaves, but her voice refused its office. She endeavored to clap her hands, but in vain.

While she remained thus—as if in the grip of some horrible dream—a lamentable voice broke into the stillness, and uttered these words: “My latest breath has just been exhaled into the waters of the river; vainly have thy servants striven to stifle the voice of truth; it rises now from the abysses of death. O wretched mother! See whence issues that fatal light, and tremble!”

Ghulendi Begum endured to hear no more. She fell back senseless. Her women, who had been anxious about her, hurried up at this moment, and uttered the most piercing cries. The Sages approached, and placed into the hands of my father, who was in terrible perturbation, the powerful elixir they had prepared. Scarcely had a few drops fallen on the sultana’s breast, when her soul, which had seemed about to follow the orders of Asrael, the Angel of Death, came back, as if in nature’s despite, to reanimate her body. Her eyes reopened to see, still illumining the pyramids, the fatal furrow of blue light which had not yet faded from the sky. She raised her arms, and, pointing out to the Émir with her finger that dread portent, was seized with the pains of childbirth, and, in the paroxysm of an unspeakable anguish, brought into the world a son and a daughter: the two wretched beings you see before you here.

The Émir’s joy in the possession of a male child was greatly dashed when he saw my mother die before his eyes. Notwithstanding his excessive grief, however, he did not lose his head, and at once handed us over to the care of his Sages. The nurses, who had been engaged in great number, wished to oppose this arrangement; but the ancient men, all uttering incantations simultaneously, compelled them to silence. The cabalistic lavers in which we were to be immersed stood all ready prepared; the

mixture of herbs exhaled a vapor that filled the whole palace. Shadan, whose very stomach was turned by the odour of these unspeakable drugs, had all the trouble in the world to restrain himself from summoning the Imans, and doctors of the law, in order to oppose the impious rites now in contemplation. Would to Heaven he had had the courage to do so! Ah, how terrible has been the influence upon us of the pernicious immersions to which we were then subjected! In short, Lord, we were plunged, both successively and together, into a hell-broth which was intended to impart to us a strength and intelligence more than human, but has only instilled into our veins the ardent elixir of a too exquisite sensibility, and the poison of an insatiable desire.

It was to the sound of brazen wands beating against the metal sides of the lavers, it was in the midst of thick fumes issuing from heaps of burning herbs, that invocations were addressed to the Jinns, and specially to those who preside over the pyramids, in order that we might be endowed with miraculous gifts. After this we were delivered over to the nurses, who scarcely could hold us in their arms, such was our liveliness and vivacity. The good women shed tears when they saw how our young blood boiled within us, and strove in vain to cool its effervescence, and to calm us by cleansing our bodies from the reeking mess with which they were still covered; but, alas! The harm was already done! Nay, if even, as sometimes happened in after days, we wished to fall into the ordinary ways of childhood, my father, who was determined at all hazards to possess children of an extraordinary nature, would brisk us up with heating drugs and the milk of negresses.

We thus became unendurably headstrong and mettlesome. At the age of seven, we could not bear contradiction. At the slightest restraint, we uttered cries of rage, and bit those who had us in charge till the blood flowed. Shaban came in for a large share of our attentions in this kind; sighing over us, however, in silence, for the Émir only regarded our spitefulness as giving evidence of a genius equal to that of Saurid and Charobé. Ah! How little did anyone suspect the real cause of our forwardness! Those who look long into the light are soonest afflicted with blindness. My father had not yet remarked that we were never arrogant and overbearing towards one another; that each was ready to yield to the other’s wishes; that Kalilah, my

brother, was never at peace save in my arms; and that, as for me, my only happiness lay in overwhelming him with caresses.

Up to this time, we had in all things been educated together: the same book was always placed before the eyes of both, each turned over the leaves alternately. Though my brother was subjected to a course of study rigorous, and above his years, I insisted on sharing it with him. Abou Taher Achmed, who cared for nothing save the aggrandisement of his son, gave directions that in this I should be humored, because he saw that his son would only fully exert himself when at my side.

We were taught not only the history of the most remote ages of antiquity, but also the geography of distant lands. The Sages never ceased to indoctrinate us with the abstruse and ideal moral code, which, as they pretended, lurked hidden in the hieroglyphics. They filled our ears with a magnificent verbiage about wisdom and foreknowledge, and the treasure houses of the Pharaohs, whom sometimes they compared to ants, and sometimes to elephants. They inspired us with a most ardent curiosity as to those mountains of hewn stone beneath which the Egyptian kings lie sepulchered. They compelled us to learn by heart the long catalogue of architects and masons who had labored at the building of them. They made us calculate the quality of provisions that would be required by the workmen employed, and how many threads went to every ell of silk with which Sultan Saurid had covered his pyramid. Together with all this rubbish, these most weariful old dotards bewildered our brains with a pitiless grammar of the language spoken of old by the priests in their subterranean labyrinths.

The childish games in which we were allowed to indulge, during our playtime, had no charms for us unless we played them together. The princesses, our sisters, wearied us to death. Vainly did they embroider for my brother the most splendid vests. Kalilah disdained their gifts, and would only consent to bind his lovely hair with the muslin that had floated over the breast of his beloved Zulkaïs. Sometimes they invited us to visit them in the twelve pavilions which my father, no longer hoping to have that number of sons, had abandoned to their use—erecting another, and of greater magnificence, for my brother, and for myself. This latter building, crowned by five domes, and situated in a thick grove, was, every night, the scene of the most splendid revels in the harem. My father would come thither,

escorted by his most beautiful slaves—each holding in her hand a candlestick with a white taper. How many times has the light of these tapers, appearing through the trees, caused our hearts to beat in sad anticipation? Everything that broke in upon our solitude was in the highest degree distasteful. To hide among the leafage, and listen to its murmur, seemed to us sweeter far than attending to the sound of the lute and the song of the musicians. But these soft luxurious reveries of ours were highly offensive to my father, he would force us back into the cupolaed saloons, and force us to take part in the common amusements.

Every year the Émir treated us with greater sternness. He did not dare to separate us altogether for fear of the effect upon his son, but tried rather to win him from our languorous dalliance by throwing him more and more into the company of young men of his own age. The game of reeds, so famous among the Arabs, was introduced into the courts of the palace. Kalilah gave himself up to the sport with immense energy; but this was only so as to bring the games to a speedier end, and then fly back to my side. Once reunited we would read together, read of the loves of Jussouf and Zelica, or some other poem that spoke of love—or else, taking advantage of our moments of liberty, we would roam through the labyrinth of corridors looking out upon the Nile, always with our arms intertwined, always with eyes looking into each other's eyes. It was almost impossible to track us in the mazy passages of the palace; and the anxiety we inspired did but add to our happiness.

One evening when we were thus tenderly alone together, and running side by side in childish glee, my father appeared before us and shuddered. "Why," said he to Kalilah, "why are you here and not in the great courtyard, shooting with the bow, of else with the horse-trainers training the horses which are to bear you into battle? Must the sun, as it rises and sets, see you only bloom and fade like a weak narcissus flower? Vainly do the Sages try to move you by the most eloquent discourses, and unveil before your eyes the learned mysteries of an older time; vainly do they tell you of warlike and magnanimous deeds. You are now nearly thirteen, and never have you evinced the smallest ambition to distinguish yourself among your fellow-men. It is not in the lurking haunts of effeminacy that great characters are formed; it is not by reading love poems that men are made fit to govern nations! Princes must act; they must show themselves to the world. Awake!

Cease to abuse my patience which has too long allowed you to waste your hours by the side of Zulkaïs. Let her, tender creature that she is, continue to play among her flowers, but do you cease to haunt her company from dawn till eve. I see well enough that it is she who is perverting you."

Having spoken these words, which he emphasized by angry and threatening gestures, Abou Taher Achmed took my brother by the arm, and left me in a very abyss of bitterness. An icy numbness overcame me. Though the sun still shed its fullest rays upon the water, I felt as if it had disappeared below the horizon. Stretched at length upon the ground, I did nothing but kiss the sprays of orange flower that Kalilah had gathered. My sight fell upon the drawings he had traced, and my tears fell in greater abundance. "Alas!" said I, "All is over. Our blissful moments will return no more. Why accuse me of perverting Kalilah? What harm can I do him? How can our happiness offend my father? If it was a crime to be happy, the Sages would surely have given us warning."

My nurse Shamelah found me in this condition of languor and dejection. To dissipate my grief she immediately led me to the grove where the young girls of the harem were playing at hide-and-seek amid the golden aviaries of which the place was full. I derived some little solace from the song of the birds, and the murmur of the rillets of clear water that trickled round the roots of the trees, but when the hour came at which Kalilah was wont to appear these sounds did but add to my sufferings.

Shamelah noticed the heavings of my breast; she drew me aside, placed her hand upon my heart, and observed me attentively. I blushed, I turned pale, and that very visibly. "I see very well," said she, "that it is your brother's absence that so upsets you. This is the fruit of the strange education to which you have been subjected. The holy reading of the Koran, the due observance of the Prophet's laws, confidence in the known mercies of Allah, these are as milk to cool the fever heat of human passion. You know not the soft delight of lifting up your soul to Heaven, and submitting without a murmur to its decrees. The Émir, alas! would forestall the future; while, on the contrary, the future should be passively awaited. Dry your tears; perchance Kalilah is not unhappy though distant from your side."

"Ah!" I cried, interrupting her with a sinister look, "if I were not fully convinced that he is unhappy, I should myself be far more miserable."

Shamelah trembled at hearing me speak thus. She cried: “Would to Heaven that they had listened to my advice, and the advice of Shaban, and instead of handing you over to the capricious teaching of the Sages, had left you, like true believers, at peace in the arms of a blissful and quiet ignorance. The ardour of your feelings alarms me in the very highest degree. Nay, it excites my indignation. Be more calm; abandon your soul to the innocent pleasures that surround you, and do so without troubling yourself whether Kalilah shares in those pleasures or not. His sex is made for toil and manly hardship. How should you be able to follow him in the chase, to handle a bow, and to dart reeds in the Arab game? He must look for companions manly and worthy of himself, and cease to fritter away his best days here at your side amid bowers and aviaries.”

This sermon, far from producing its desired effect, made me altogether beside myself. I trembled with rage, and, rising to my feet like one bereft of reason, I rent my veil into ten thousand pieces, and, tearing my breast, cried with a loud voice that my nurse had mishandled me.

The games ceased. Everyone crowded about me; and though the princesses did not love me overmuch, because I was Kalilah’s favorite sister, yet my tears, and the blood that flowed from my self-inflicted wounds, excited their indignation against Shamelah. Unfortunately for the poor woman, she had just awarded a severe punishment to two young slaves who had been guilty of stealing pomegranates; and these two little vipers, in order to be revenged, bore testimony against her, and confirmed all I said. They ran, and retailed their lies to my father, who, not having Shaban at his side, and being, moreover, in a good temper because my brother had just thrown a javelin into a crocodile’s eye, ordered Shamelah to be tied to a tree, and whipped without mercy.

Her cries pierced my heart. She cried without ceasing: “O you, whom I have carried in my arms, whom I have fed from my breast, how can you cause me to suffer thus? Justify me! Declare the truth! It is only because I tried to save you from the black abyss, into which your wild and unruly desires cannot fail to precipitate you in the end, that you are thus causing this body of mine to be torn to shreds.”

I was about to ask that she should be released and spared further punishment, when some demon put into my mind the thought that it was she who, conjointly with Shaban, had inspired my father with the desire of

making a hero of Kalilah. Whereupon I armed myself against every feeling of humanity, and cried out that they should go on whipping her till she confessed her crime. Darkness at last put an end to this horrible scene. The victim was unloosed. Her friends, and she had many, endeavored to close her wounds. They asked me, on their knees, to give them a sovereign balm which I possessed, a balm which the Sages had prepared. I refused. Shamelah was placed before my eyes on a litter, and, of set purpose, kept for a moment in front of the place where I stood. That breast, on which I had so often slept, streamed with blood. At this spectacle, at the memory of the tender care she had taken of my infancy, my heart at last was moved—I burst into tears; I kissed the hand she feebly extended to the monster she had nourished in her bosom; I ran to fetch the balm; I applied it myself, begging her, at the same time, to forgive me, and declaring openly that she was innocent, and I alone guilty.

This confession caused a shudder to pass among all who surrounded us. They recoiled from me with horror. Shamelah, though half dead, perceived this, and stifled her groans with the skirt of her garment so as not to add to my despair and the baleful consequences of what I had done. But her efforts were vain. All fled, casting upon me looks that were evil indeed.

The litter was removed, and I found myself alone. The night was very dark. Plaintive sounds seemed to issue from the cypresses that cast their shadows over the place. Seized with terror, I lost myself amid the black foliage, a prey to the most harrowing remorse. Delirium laid its hand upon me. The earth seemed to yawn before my feet, and I to fall headlong into an abyss which had no bottom. My spirit was in this distraught condition when, through the thick underwood, I saw shine the torches of my father’s attendants. I noticed that the cortège stopped suddenly. Someone issued from the crowd. A lively presentiment made my heart beat. The footsteps came nearer; and, by the light of a faint and doleful glimmer, such as prevails in the place where we now are, I saw Kalilah appear before me.

“Dear Zulkaïs,” cried he, intermingling words and kisses, “I have passed an age without seeing you, but I have spent it in carrying out my father’s wishes. I have fought with one of the most formidable monsters of the river. But what would I not do when, for recompense, I am offered the bliss of spending a whole evening with you alone? Come! Let us enjoy the time to the full. Let us bury ourselves among these trees. Let us, from our retreat,

listen, disdainful, to the tumultuous sound of music and dances. I will cause sherbet and cakes to be served on the moss that borders the little porphyry fountain. There I shall enjoy your sweet looks, and charming converse, till the first dawn of the new day. Then, alas! I must plunge once more into the world's vortex, dart accursed reeds, and undergo the interrogatories of Sages."

Kalilah said all this with such volubility that I was unable to put in a word. He drew me after him, scarce resisting. We made our way through the leafage to the fountain. The memory of what Shamelah had said concerning my excessive tenderness for my brother, had, in my own despite, produced a strong impression upon me. I was about to withdraw my hand from his, when, by the light of the little lamps that had been lit on the margin of the fountain, I saw his charming face reflected in the waters, I saw his large eyes dewy with love, I felt his looks pierce to the very bottom of my heart. All my projects of reform, all my agony of remorse, made way for a ferment of very different feelings. I dropped on the ground by Kalilah's side, and leaning his head upon my breast, gave a free course to my tears. Kalilah, when he saw me thus crying passionately, eagerly asked me why I wept. I told him all that had passed between myself and Shamelah, without omitting a single particular. His heart was at first much moved by the picture I drew of her sufferings; but, a moment after, he cried: "Let the officious slave perish! Must the heart's soft yearnings ever meet with opposition! How should we not love one another, Zulkaïs? Nature caused us to be born together. Has not nature, too, implanted in us the same tastes, and a kindred ardour? Have not my father and his Sages made us partakers in the same magic baths? Who could blame a sympathy all has conspired to create? No, Zulkaïs, Shaban and our superstitious nurse may say what they please. There is no crime in our loving one another. The crime would rather be if we allowed ourselves, like cowards, to be separated. Let us swear—not by the Prophet, of whom we have little knowledge, but by the elements that sustain man's existence—let us swear that, rather than consent to live the one without the other, we will take into our veins the soft distillation of the flowers of the stream, which the Sages have so often vaunted in our hearing. That essence will lull us painlessly to sleep in each other's arms, and so bear our souls imperceptibly into the peace of another existence."

These words quieted me. I resumed my ordinary gaiety, and we played and sported together. “I shall be very valiant tomorrow,” Kalilah would say, “so as to purchase such moments as these, for it is only by the promise of such a prize that my father can induce me to submit to his fantastic injunctions.”

“Ha, ha!” cried Abou Taber Achmed, issuing from behind some bushes, where he had been listening. “Is that your resolve! We will see if you keep to it! You are already fully paid this evening for the little you have done during the day. Hence! And as to you, Zulkaïs, go and weep over the terrible outrage you have committed against Shamelah.”

In the greatest consternation we threw ourselves at his feet; but, turning his back upon us, he ordered the eunuchs to conduct us to our separate apartments.

It was no scruple with regard to the kind and quality of our love that exercised the Émir. His sole end was to see his son become a great warrior, and a potent prince, and with regard to the character of the means by which that end was to be obtained, he cared not one tittle. As for me, he regarded me only as an instrument that might have its uses; nor would he have felt any scruples concerning the danger of inflaming our passion by the alternation of obstacles and concessions. On the other hand, he foresaw that indolence and pleasure, too constantly indulged in, must necessarily interfere with his designs. He deemed it necessary, therefore, to adopt with us a harsher and more decided line of conduct than he had hitherto done; and in an unhappy moment he carried that resolution into effect. Alas! Without his precautions, his projects, his accursed foresight, we should have remained in innocence, and never been brought to the horror of this place of torment!

The Émir, having retired to his apartments, caused Shaban to be summoned, and imparted to him his fixed resolve to separate us during a certain time. The prudent eunuch prostrated himself immediately, with his face to the ground, and then, rising to his feet, said: “Let my lord forgive his slave if he ventures to be of a different opinion. Do not loose upon this nascent flame the winds of opposition and absence, lest the final conflagration should be such as you are unable to master. You know the Prince’s impetuous disposition; his sister has today given proofs, only too signal, of hers. Suffer them to remain together without contradiction; leave

them to their childish propensities. They will soon grow tired of one another; and Kalilah, disgusted with the monotony of the harem, will beg you on his knees to remove him from its precincts."

"Have you done talking your nonsense?" interrupted the Emir impatiently. "Ah, how little do you know the genius of Kalilah! I have carefully studied him, I have seen that the operations of my Sages have not been void of their effect. He is incapable of pursuing any object with indifference. If I leave him with Zulkaïs, he will be utterly drowned in effeminacy. If I remove her from him, and make their reunion the price of the great things I require at his hands, there is nothing of which he will not prove himself capable. Let the doctors of our law dote as they please! What can their idle drivel matter so long as he becomes what I desire him to be? Know besides, O eunuch, that when he has once tasted the delights of ambition, the idea of Zulkaïs will evaporate in his mind as a light morning mist absorbed into the rays of the noonday sun—the sun of glory. Therefore enter tomorrow morning into the chamber of Zulkaïs, forestall her awakening, wrap her up in these robes, and convey her, with her slaves and all that may be necessary to make her life pleasant, to the borders of the Nile, where a boat will be ready to receive you. Follow the course of the stream for twenty-nine days. On the thirtieth you will disembark at the Isle of Ostriches. Lodge the princess in the palace which I have had built for the use of the Sages who roam those deserts—deserts replete with ruins and with wisdom. One of these Sages you will find there, called the Palm-tree-climber, because he pursues his course of contemplation upon the tops of the palm-trees. This ancient man knows an infinite number of stories, and it will be his care to divert Zulkaïs, for I know very well that, next to Kalilah, stories are the chief object of her delight."

Shaban knew his master too well to venture upon any further opposition. He went, therefore, to give the necessary orders, but sighed heavily as he went. He had not the slightest desire to undertake a journey to the Isle of Ostriches, and had formed a very unfavorable opinion of the Palm-tree-climber. He was himself a faithful Mussulman, and held the Sages and all their works in abomination.

Everything was made ready all too soon. The agitation of the previous day had greatly fatigued me, so that I slept very heavily. I was taken from my bed so quietly, and carried with such skill, that I never woke till I was at

a distance of four leagues from Cairo. Then the noise of the water gurgling round the boat began to alarm me. It filled my ears strangely, and I half fancied I had drunk of the beverage spoken of by Kalilah, and been borne beyond the confines of our planet. I lay thus, bewildered with strange imaginings, and did not dare to open my eyes, but stretched out my arms to feel for Kalilah. I thought he was by my side. Judge of the feelings of hateful surprise to which I was doomed, when, instead of touching his delicate limbs, I seized hold of the horny hand of the eunuch who was steering the boat, and was even older, and more grotesquely ugly, than Shaban himself.

I sat up and uttered piercing cries. I opened my eyes, and saw before me a waste stretch of sky, and of water bounded by bluish banks. The sun was shining in its fullness. The azure heavens caused all nature to rejoice. A thousand river birds played around amid the water-lilies, which the boat shot through at every moment, their large yellow flowers shining like gold, and exhaling a sweet perfume. But all these objects of delight were lost upon me, and, instead of rejoicing my heart, filled me with a somber melancholy.

Looking about me, I saw my slaves in a state of desolation, and Shaban who, with an air at once of discontent and authority, was making them keep silence. The name of Kalilah came at every moment to the tip of my tongue. At last I spoke it aloud, with tears in my eyes, and asked where he was, and what they intended to do with me. Shaban, instead of replying, ordered his eunuchs to redouble their exertions, and to strike up an Egyptian song, and sing in time to the cadence of their oars. Their accursed chorus rang out so potently that it brought an even worse bewilderment in my brain. We shot through the water like an arrow. It was in vain that I begged the rowers to stop, or at least to tell me where I was going. The barbarous wretches were deaf to my entreaties. The more insistent I was, the louder did they roar out their detestable song so as to drown my cries. Shaban, with his cracked voice, made more noise than the rest.

Nothing can express the torments I endured, and the horror I felt at finding myself so far from Kalilah, and on the waters of the fearful Nile. My terrors increased with nightfall. I saw, with an inexpressible anguish, the sun go losing itself in the waters—its light, in a thousand rays, trembling upon their surface. I brought to mind the quiet moments which, at

that same hour, I had passed with Kalilah, and, hiding my head in my veil, I gave myself up to despair.

Soon a soft rustling became audible. Our boat was shearing its way through banks of reeds. A great silence succeeded to the song of the rowers, for Shaban had landed. He came back in a few moments, and carried me to a tent, erected a few paces from the river's bank. I found there lights, mattresses stretched on the ground, a table covered with various kinds of food, and an immense copy of the Koran, unfolded. I hated the holy book. The Sages, our instructors, had often turned it into ridicule, and I had never read it with Kalilah. So I threw it contemptuously to the ground. Shaban took upon himself to scold me; but I flew at him, and endeavored to reduce him to silence. In this I proved successful, and the same treatment retained its efficacy during the whole course of the long expedition.

Our subsequent experiences were similar to those of the first day. Endlessly did we pass banks of water-lilies, and flocks of birds, and an infinite number of small boats that came and went with merchandize.

At last we began to leave behind us the plain country. Like all who are unhappy and thus led to look forward, I kept my eyes continually fixed on the horizon ahead of us, and one evening I saw, rising there, great masses of much greater height, and of a form infinitely more varied, than the pyramids. These masses proved to be mountains. Their aspect inspired me with fear. The terrible thought occurred to me that my father was sending me to the woeful land of the Negro king, so that I might be offered up as a sacrifice to the idols, who, as the Sages pretended, were greedy of princesses. Shaban perceived my increasing distress, and at last took pity upon me. He revealed our ultimate destination, adding that though my father wished to separate me from Kalilah, it was not forever, and that, in the meanwhile, I should make the acquaintance of a marvelous personage, called the Palm-tree-climber, who was the best story-teller in the universe.

This information quieted me to some extent. The hope, however distant, of seeing Kalilah again, poured balm into my soul, and I was not sorry to hear that I should have stories to my liking. Moreover, the idea of a realm of solitude, such as the Ostrich Isle, flattered my romantic spirit. If I must be separated from him whom I cherished more than life itself, I preferred to undergo my fate rather in some savage spot than amid the glitter and chatter of a harem. Far from all such impertinent frivolities, I purposed to abandon

my whole soul to the sweet memories of the past, and give a free course to the languorous reveries in which I could see again the loved image of my Kalilah.

Fully occupied with these projects, it was with heedless eyes that I saw our boat approaching nearer and nearer to the land of mountains. The rocks encroached more and more upon the border of the stream, and seemed soon about to deprive us of all sight of the sky. I saw trees of immeasurable height whose intertwisted roots hung down in the water. I heard the noise of cataracts, and saw the boiling eddies flash in foam and fill the air with a mist thin as silver gauze. Through this veil I perceived, at last, a green island of no great size, on which the ostriches were gravely promenading. Still further forward I discerned a domed edifice standing against a hill all covered with nests. This palace was utterly strange of aspect, and had, in truth, been built by a noted cabalist. The walls were of yellow marble, and shone like polished metal, and every object reflected in them assumed gigantic proportions. I trembled when I saw what fantastic figures the ostriches presented as seen in that strange mirror; their necks seemed to go losing themselves in the clouds, and their eyes shone like enormous balls of iron heated red in a furnace.

My terrors were observed by Shaban, who made me understand the magnifying qualities of the palace walls, and assured me that even if the birds were really as monstrous as they appeared, I might trust, in all security, to their good manners, since the Palm-tree-climber had been laboring for over a hundred years to reduce their disposition to an exemplary mildness. Scarcely had he furnished me with this information, when I landed at a spot where the grass was green and fresh. A thousand unknown flowers, a thousand shells of fantastic shape, a thousand oddly fashioned snails, adorned the shore. The ardour of the sun was tempered by the perpetual dew distilled from the falling waters, whose monotonous sound inclined to slumber.

Feeling drowsy, I ordered a penthouse to be affixed to one of the palm-trees of which the place was full; for the Palm-tree-climber, who always bore at his girdle the keys of the palace, was at that hour pursuing his meditations at the other end of the island.

While a soft drowsiness took possession of my senses, Shaban ran to present my father’s letters to the man of wisdom. In order to do this, he was

compelled to attach the missives to the end of a long pole, as the Climber was at the top of a palm-tree fifty cubits high, and refused to come down without knowing why he was summoned. So soon as he had perused the leaves of the roll, he carried them respectfully to his forehead, and slipped down like a meteor; and indeed he had somewhat the appearance of a meteor, for his eyes were of flame, and his nose was a beautiful blood-red.

Shaban, amazed by the rapidity of the old man's descent, uninjured, from the tree, was somewhat outraged when asked to take him on his back; but the Climber declared that he never so far condescended as to walk. The eunuch, who loved neither Sages nor their caprices, and regarded both as the plagues of the Émir's family, hesitated for a moment; but, bearing in mind the positive order he had received, he conquered his aversion, and took the Palm-tree-climber on his shoulders, saying: "Alas, the good hermit Abou Gabdolle Guehaman would not have behaved after this manner, and would, moreover, have been much more worthy of my assistance."

The Climber heard these words in high dudgeon, for he had aforetime had pious squabbles with the hermit of the Sandy Desert; so he administered a mighty kick on to the small of Shaban's back, and thrust a fiery nose into the middle of his countenance. Shaban, on this, stumbled, but pursued his way without uttering a syllable.

I was still asleep. Shaban came up to my couch, and, throwing his burden at my feet, said, and his voice had a certain ring in it that woke me without difficulty: "Here is the Climber! Much good may he do you!"

At the sight of such an object, I was quite unable, notwithstanding all my sorrows, to help bursting out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. The old man did not change countenance, notwithstanding; he jingled his keys with an air of importance, and said to Shaban, in grave tones: "Take me again upon your back; let us go to the palace, and I will open its doors, which have never, hitherto, admitted any member of the female sex save my great egg-layer, the queen of the ostriches."

I followed. It was late. The great birds were coming down from the hills, and surrounded us in flocks, pecking at the grass and at the trees. The noise they made with their beaks was such that I seemed to be listening to the feet of an army on the march. At last I found myself before the shining walls of the palace. Though I knew the trick of them, my own distorted figure

terrified me, as did also the figure of the Climber on the shoulders of Shaban.

We entered into a vaulted apartment, lined with black marble starred with golden stars, which inspired a certain feeling of awe—a feeling to which, however, the old man's grotesque and amusing grimaces afforded some relief. The air was stifling and nearly made me sick. The Climber, perceiving this, caused a great fire to be lit, and threw into it a small aromatic ball which he drew from his bosom. Immediately a vapor, rather pleasant to the smell, but very penetrating, diffused itself throughout the room. The eunuch fled, sneezing. As for me, I drew near the fire, and sadly stirring the ashes, began to form in them the cipher of Kalilah.

The Climber did not interfere. He praised the education I had received, and approved greatly of our immersions, just after birth, by the Sages, adding maliciously that nothing so sharpened the wits as a passion somewhat out of the common. "I see clearly," he continued, "that you are absorbed in reflections of an interesting nature; and I am well pleased that it should be so. I myself had five sisters; we made very light of Mahomet's teachings, and loved each other with some fervor. I still, after the lapse of a hundred years, bear this in my memory with pleasure, for we scarcely ever forget early impressions. Thus my constancy has greatly commended me to the Jinns whose favorite I am. If you are able, like myself, to persevere in your present sentiments, they will probably do something for you. In the meanwhile, place your confidence in me. I shall not prove surly or unsympathetic as a guardian and keeper. Don't get it into your head that I am dependent on the caprice of your father, who has a limited outlook, and prefers ambition to pleasure. I am happier amid my palms, and my ostriches, and in the enjoyments of the delights of meditation, than he in his divan, and in all his grandeur. I don't mean to say that you yourself cannot add to the pleasures of my life. The more gracious you are to me, the more shall I show civility to you, and make you the partaker in things of beauty. If you seem to be happy in this place of solitude, you will acquire a great reputation for wisdom, and I know, by my own experience, that under the cloak of a great reputation it is possible to hide whole treasures of folly. Your father in his letters has told me all your story. While people think that you are giving heed to my instructions, you can talk to me about your Kalilah as much as you like, and without offending me in anyway. On the

contrary, nothing affords me greater pleasure than to observe the movements of a heart abandoning itself to its youthful inclinations, and I shall be glad to see the bright colors of a first love mantling on young cheeks."

While listening to this strange discourse, I kept my eyes on the ground, but the bird of hope fluttered in my bosom. At last I looked at the Sage, and his great red nose, that shone like a luminous point in that room of black marble, seemed to me less disagreeable. The smile accompanying my glance was of such significance that the Climber easily perceived I had swallowed his bait. This pleased him so mightily that he forgot his learned indolence, and ran to prepare a repast of which I stood greatly in need.

Scarcely had he departed, when Shaban came in, holding in his hand a letter, sealed with my father's seal, which he had just opened. "Here," said he, "are the instructions I was only to read when I reached this place; and I have read them only too clearly. Alas! How wretched it is to be the slave of a prince whose head has been turned by much learning! Unhappy princess! I am compelled, much against my will, to abandon you here. I must re-embark with all who have followed me hither, and only leave in your service the lame Mouzaka, who is deaf and dumb. The wretched Climber will be your only helper. Heaven alone knows what you will gain from his companionship. The Émir regards him as a prodigy of learning and wisdom; but as to this he must suffer a faithful Mussulman to have his doubts." As he spoke these words, Shaban touched the letter three times with his forehead, and then, leaping backwards, disappeared from my sight.

The hideous manner in which the poor eunuch wept on leaving me, amused me much. I was far indeed from making any attempt to keep him back. His presence was odious to me, for he always avoided all conversation about the only subject that filled my heart. On the other hand, I was enchanted at the choice of Mouzaka as my attendant. With a deaf and dumb slave, I should enjoy full liberty in imparting my confidences to the obliging old man, and in following his advice, if so be that he gave me advice of which I approved.

All my thoughts were thus assuming a somewhat rosy hue, when the Climber returned, smothered up in carpets and cushions of silk, which he stretched out on the ground; and he then proceeded, with a pleasant and contented air, to light torches, and to burn pastilles in braziers of gold. He

had taken these sumptuous articles from the palace treasury, which, as he assured me, was well worthy of exciting my curiosity. I told him I was quite ready to take his word for it at that particular time, the smell of the excellent viands which had preceded him having very agreeably whetted my appetite. These viands consisted chiefly of slices of deer spiced with fragrant herbs, of eggs prepared after divers recipes, and of cakes more dainty and delicate than the petals of a white rose. There was besides a ruddy liquor, made of date juice, and served in strange translucent shells, and sparkling like the eyes of the Climber himself.

We lay down to our meal together in very friendly fashion. My amazing keeper greatly praised the quality of his wine, and made very good use of it, to the intense surprise of Mouzaka, who, huddled up in a corner, indulged in undescribable gestures which the marble reflected on all sides. The fire burnt gaily, throwing out sparks, which, as they darkened, exhaled an exquisite perfume. The torches gave a brilliant light, the braziers shone brightly, and the soft warmth that reigned in the apartment inclined to a voluptuous indolence.

The situation in which I found myself was so singular, the kind of prison in which I was confined was so different from anything I could have imagined, and the ways of my keeper were so grotesque, that from time to time I rubbed my eyes to make sure that the whole thing was not a dream. I should even have derived amusement from my surroundings, if the thought that I was so far from Kalilah had left me for a single moment. The Climber, to distract my thoughts, began the marvelous story of the Giant Gebri, and the artful Charodé, but I interrupted him, and asked him to listen to the recital of my own real sorrows, promising that, afterwards, I should give ear to his tales. Alas! I never kept that promise. Vainly, at repeated intervals, did he try to excite my curiosity: I had none save with regard to Kalilah, and did not cease to repeat: “Where is he? What is he doing? When shall I see him again?”

The old man, seeing me so headstrong in my passion, and so well resolved to brave all remorse, became convinced that I was a fit object for his nefarious purposes, for, as my hearers will doubtless have already understood, he was a servant of the monarch who reigns in this place of torment. In the perversity of his soul, and that fatal blindness which makes men desire to find an entrance here, he had vowed to induce twenty

wretches to serve Eblis, and he exactly wanted my brother and myself to complete that number. Far indeed was he, therefore, from really trying to stifle the yearnings of my heart; and though, in order to fan the flame that consumed me, he seemed from time to time, to be desirous of telling me stories, yet, in reality, his head was filled with quite other thoughts.

I spent a great part of the night in making my criminal avowals. Towards morning I fell asleep. The Climber did the same, at a few paces' distance, having first, without ceremony, applied to my forehead a kiss that burned me like a red-hot iron. My dreams were of the saddest. They left but a confused impression on my mind; but, so far as I can recollect, they conveyed the warnings of Heaven, which still desired to open before me a door of escape and of safety.

So soon as the sun had risen, the Climber led me into his woods, introduced me to his ostriches, and gave me an exhibition of his supernatural agility. Not only did he climb to the tremulous tops of the tallest and most slender palms, bending them beneath his feet like ears of corn, but he would dart like an arrow from one tree to another. After the display of several of these gymnastic feats, he settled on a branch, told me he was about to indulge in his daily meditations, and advised me to go with Mouzaka and bathe by the border of the stream, on the other side of the hill.

The heat was excessive. I found the clear waters cool and delicious. Bathing-pools, lined with precious marbles, had been hollowed out in the middle of a little level mead over which high rocks cast their shadow. Pale narcissi and gladioli grew on the margin, and, leaning towards the water, waved over my head. I loved these languid flowers, they seemed an emblem of my fortunes, and for several hours I allowed their perfumes to intoxicate my soul.

On returning to the palace, I found that the Climber had made great preparations for my entertainment. The evening passed like the evening before; and from day to day, pretty nearly after the same manner, I spent four months. Nor can I say that the time passed unhappily. The romantic solitude, the old man's patient attention, and the complacency with which he listened to love's foolish repetitions, all seemed to unite in soothing my pain. I should perhaps have spent whole years in merely nursing those sweet illusions that are so rarely realized, have seen the ardour of my passion dwindle and die, have become no more than the tender sister and

friend of Kalilah, if my father had not, in pursuit of his wild schemes, delivered me over to the impious scoundrel who sat daily watching at my side to make me his prey. Ah, Shaban! Ah, Shamelah! You, my real friends, why was I torn from your arms? Why did you not, from the very first, perceive the germs of a too passionate tenderness existing in our hearts, germs which ought then and there to have been extirpated, since the day would come when not fire and steel would be of any avail!

One morning when I was steeped in sad thoughts, and expressing in even more violent language than usual my despair at being separated from Kalilah, the old man fixed upon me his piercing eyes, and addressed me in these words: “Princess, you, who have been taught by the most enlightened of Sages, cannot doubtless be ignorant of the fact that there are Intelligences, superior to the race of man, who take part in human affairs, and are able to extricate us from the greatest difficulties. I, who am telling you this, have had experience, more than once, of their power; for I had a right to their assistance, having been placed, as you yourself have been, under their protection from birth. I quite see that you cannot live without your Kalilah. It is time, therefore, that you should apply for aid to such helpful spirits. But will you have the strength of mind, the courage to endure the approach of Beings so different from mankind? I know that their coming produces certain inevitable effects, as internal tremors, the revulsion of the blood from its ordinary course; but I know also that these terrors, these revulsions, painful as they undoubtedly are, must appear as nothing compared with the mortal pain of separation from an object loved greatly and exclusively. If you resolve to invoke the Jinn of the Great Pyramid, who, as I know, presided at your birth, if you are willing to abandon yourself to his care, I can, this very evening, give you speech of your brother, who is nearer than you imagine. The Being in question, so renowned among the Sages, is called Omoultakos: he is, at present, in charge of the treasure which the ancient cabalist kings have placed in this desert. By means of the other spirits under his command, he is in close touch with his sister, whom, by the by, he loved in his time just as you now love Kalilah. He will, therefore, enter into your sorrows just as much as I do myself, and will, I make no doubt, do all he can to further your desires.”

At these last words, my heart beat with unspeakable violence. The possibility of seeing Kalilah once again excited a transport in my breast. I

rose hastily, and ran about the room like a mad creature. Then, coming back to the old man's side, I embraced him, called him my father, and throwing myself at his knees, I implored him, with clasped hands, not to defer my happiness, but to conduct me, at whatever hazard, to the sanctuary of Omoultakos.

The crafty old scoundrel was well pleased, and saw with a malicious eye into what a state of delirium he had thrown me. His only thought was how to fan the flame thus kindled. For this purpose, he resumed a cold and reserved aspect, and said, in tones of great solemnity: "Be it known to you, Zulkaïs, that I have my doubts, and cannot help hesitating, in a matter of such importance, great as is my desire to serve you. You evidently do not know how dangerous is the step you propose to take; or, at least, you do not fully appreciate its extreme rashness. I cannot tell how far you will be able to endure the fearful solitude of the immeasurable vaults you must traverse, and the strange magnificence of the place to which I must conduct you. Neither can I tell in what shape the Jinn will appear. I have often seen him in a form so fearful that my senses have long remained numbed; at other times he has shown himself under an aspect so grotesque that I have scarcely been able to refrain from choking laughter, for nothing can be more capricious than beings of that nature. Omoultakos, mayhap, will spare your weakness; but it is right to warn you that the adventure on which you are bound is perilous, that the moment of the Jinn's apparition is uncertain, that while you are waiting in expectation you must show neither fear nor horror, nor impatience, and that, at the sight of him, you must be very sure not to laugh, and not to cry. Observe, moreover, that you must wait in silence, and the stillness of death, and with your hands crossed over your breast, until he speaks to you, for a gesture, a smile, a groan, would involve not only your destruction, but also that of Kalilah, and my own."

"All that you tell me," I replied, "carries terror into my bosom; but, impelled by such a fatal love as mine, what would one not venture!"

"I congratulate you on your sublime perseverance," rejoined the Climber, with a smile of which I did not then appreciate the full significance and wickedness. "Prepare yourself. As soon as darkness covers the earth, I will go and suspend Mouzaka from the top of one of my highest palm-trees, so that she may not be in our way. I will then lead you to the door of the gallery that leads to the retreat of Omoultakos. There I shall

leave you, and myself, according to my custom, go and meditate at the top of one of the trees, and make vows for the success of your enterprise."

I spent the interval in anxiety and trepidation. I wandered aimlessly amid the valleys and hillocks on the island. I gazed fixedly into the depths of the waters. I watched the rays of the sun declining over their surface, and looked forward, half in fear and half in hope, to the moment when the light should abandon our hemisphere. The holy calm of a serene night at last overspread the world.

I saw the Climber detach himself from a flock of ostriches that were gravely marching to drink at the river. He came to me with measured steps. Putting his finger to his lips, he said: "Follow me in silence."

I obeyed. He opened a door, and made me enter, with him, into a narrow passage, not more than four feet high, so that I was compelled to walk half doubled up. The air I breathed was damp and stifling. At every step I caught my feet in viscous plants that issued from certain cracks and crevices in the gallery. Through these cracks the feeble light of the moon's rays found an entrance, shedding light, every here and there, upon little wells that had been dug to right and left of our path. Through the black waters in these wells I seemed to see reptiles with human faces.

I turned away my eyes in horror. I burned with desire to ask the Climber what all this might mean, but the gloom and solemnity of his looks made me keep silence. He appeared to progress painfully, and to be brushing aside with his hands something to me invisible. Soon I was no longer able to see him at all. We were going, as it seemed, round and round in complete darkness; and, so as not to lose him altogether in that frightful labyrinth, I was compelled to lay hold upon his robe.

At last we reached a place where I began to breathe a freer and fresher air. A solitary taper of enormous size, fixed upright in a block of marble, lighted up a vast hall, and discovered to my eyes five staircases, whose banisters, made of different metals, faded upwards into the darkness. There we stopped, and the old man broke the silence, saying: "Chose between these staircases. One only leads to the treasury of Omoultakos. From the others, which go losing themselves to cavernous depths, you would never return. Where they lead you would find nothing but hunger, and the bones of those whom famine has aforetime destroyed."

Having said these words, he disappeared, and I heard a door closing behind him.

Judge of my terror, you who have heard the ebony portals, which confine us forever in this place of torment, grind upon their ebony hinges! Indeed, I dare to say that my position was, if possible, even more terrible than yours, for I was alone. I fell to the earth at the base of the block of marble. A sleep, such as that which ends our mortal existence, overcame my senses. Suddenly a voice, clear, sweet, insinuating like the voice of Kalilah, flattered my ears. I seemed, as in a dream, to see him on the staircase, the banisters of which were of brass. A majestic warrior, whose pale front bore a diadem, held him by the hand. “Zulkaïs,” said Kalilah, with an afflicted air, “Allah forbids our union. But Eblis, whom you see here, extends to us his protection. Implore his aid, and follow the path to which he points you.”

I awoke in a transport of courage and resolution, seized the taper, and began, without hesitation, to ascend the stairway with the brazen banisters. The steps seemed to multiply beneath my feet; but my resolution never faltered; and, at last, I reached a chamber, square, and immensely spacious, and paved with a marble that was of flesh color, and marked as with the veins and arteries of the human body. The walls of this place of terror were hidden by huge piles of carpets of a thousand kinds, and a thousand hues, and these moved slowly to and fro, as if painfully stirred by human creatures stifling beneath their weight. All around were ranged black chests, whose steel padlocks seemed encrusted with blood. Muffled hissings appeared to issue from under the lids of some of these chests; from others, groans and cries as of indistinct voices, and metallic clinkings. I thought that the voices were those of dives, or afrits, rather than men. I shuddered, and fled on, all the more precipitately because some of them had seemed to call me by name. The chamber was endless, and I saw that I had been mistaken as to its form. It enlarged itself before me, like the perspectives of a hall of ill dreams. Insensibly, and as if by the operation of some enchantment, it assumed a more frightful aspect. The marble pavement was now of that livid color seen in the flesh of bodies after death, its veinings were dark as if blood had coagulated within them, and were interspersed with mottlings such as would be made on human skin by the contusions of iron maces. Columns, higher than the monumental pillars of the old kings of Egypt, rose round me into gloom that the great taper was unable to

pierce. A blue mist, such as might ascend from nether gulfs, wavered like a curtain before the removed walls, and the light flickered woefully in my arms, as it met the dank sighing exhaled by the subterranean reaches.

I had need of all my resolution, and was forced to summon up the loved image of Kalilah, with all possible clearness, before I could proceed any further. The vastness of the room, its dismal character and furnishings, terrified me more and more. A weakness seized upon my limbs and senses, the taper became an almost insupportable burden, and I could scarce uplift it to inspect the curious treasures piled about me. Notwithstanding this, I perceived that there were open caskets, overrunning with divers jewels, with goldwork wrought in the fashion of antiquity, and still untarnished; so that I felt sure, at first, that I had reached the treasury of Omoultakos, the Jinn to whom the cabalist kings had entrusted their wealth. But soon doubt came upon me, as I began to note the hideous confusion that prevailed everywhere, the human finger-bones, and other charnel relics, that were heaped without discrimination amid the precious stones, or stored in separate vessels of graven silver, as if they too had been of rare worth. I saw, also, that some of the larger caskets were really sarcophagi, such as were used by the Egyptians. They had been brimmed with skulls, and the severed members of mummies, and gold coins. Serpents, milk-white, and wholly scaleless, crept to and fro, bringing in their mouths bright jewels, or fragments of bone, which they deposited in certain receptacles that were not yet filled to the rim.

A faintness, such as the dying must undergo, would have overcome me at the sight of these horrors, and the musty odours which they emitted; but I was revived by an extraordinary apparition, which, through the speed and brilliance of its descent from one of the topless pillars, I took for a moment to be the Palm-tree-climber. The apparition reached the floor in a flash; it rose up, and I saw my mistake. It was almost more than I could do to refrain from bursting into wild laughter, for the uncommon personage before me resembled, as much as anything else, a mangy baboon whose hair had fallen out in broad patches. His head and face, indeed, were altogether hairless, like those of the ancient priests, but the brows had been painted with kohl to relieve their blank appearance, and the same cosmetic had been applied in large mouches about the jowls. He carried at his side, from a girdle of human gut, a capacious and somewhat tattered pouch, in the form of a

stomach sac, from whose rifts unmentionable objects protruded. More amazing than all this, however, was the long tail, seeming to be on fire perpetually, which the remarkable being flourished in my face like a torch.

Recalling the injunctions of the Climber, I succeeded in smothering my mirth, and maintained a strict silence. It was well, no doubt, that I did so. Omoultakos, for it was indeed the Jinn himself, addressed me in a hollow and lugubrious voice that accorded somewhat strangely with his aspect, saying: “Princess, you need carry no longer the immense taper whose weight has grown so burdensome to you. My tail, which burns with inexhaustible fire, will now serve as a flambeau for us both.”

He indicated a half-empty sarcophagus, in which, with expressive signs, he told me to deposit the taper, leaving it upright, so that the grease would not gutter upon the rare contents of that reliquary. Then he said to me: “As a fitting reward for your perseverance in daring the shadows of the subterranean labyrinth, I shall show you the many treasures which have been amassed in this chamber, during the eras of my custodianship. To the wealth of the cabalist rulers, in itself quite prodigious, I have since added much that I prize peculiarly. Eblis, it is true, in his deep-lying halls, has been able to gather together a far more inclusive assortment of terrestrial riches; but I venture to assert that my collection, in some ways, is a little choicer than his. For example, in this casket, you behold, among other remnants of former delight and beauty, a thigh-bone that once belonged to Balkis.”

He waved his tail, which flared brightly, above the relic in question, and then, with a ludicrous and proprietary air, passed on to others. At one time, during our tour, he paused before a small box of green bronze, filled with a dark brown powder, and lifting a pinch of the powder to his nostrils, gave vent to prolonged and violent sternutations. When these had ceased, he remarked with much satisfaction: “There is, to my knowledge, no sneezing-powder more efficacious than the one I have just employed, which was obtained through the atomizing of the mummies of antique embalmers.”

My astonishment and disgust were mingled with a strange propensity to laughter, which I conquered again and yet again, with much difficulty. Omoultakos, in a most extensive circuit of inspection about the chamber, illumined for me with the unfailing light of his appendage, an infinite variety of objects that testified to mortal corruption. All the while, he

discoursed upon their quondam ownership, and their history, in a fashion that was no less proud than funereal. He showed me, moreover, certain musical instruments, which he himself had designed during hours of leisure. Among them, I remember that there were lutes fashioned from the ribs and arm-bones of women, and stringed with male sinews, and also there were tabors of human skin, that had a deep sonority. On more than one of these instruments, he played a while for my diversion, and though I thought the airs he extorted from them were more than atrocious, I felt that it would be politic to commend, rather than criticize, his playing. In the meanwhile, I burned with desire to question him regarding the whereabouts of Kalilah, and the means through which we might again be united; but mindful of all that the Climber had told me, I restrained my eagerness.

At last, Omoultakos, who had led me on for a great distance between the columns, and the sarcophagi, and had laid aside his unusual instruments of music, turned on me, and said: “Think not, O princess, that all my treasures are things which have come down from antiquity. In the recesses of this unfathomable chamber, objects of more recent date are also conserved. One of them, at least, will interest you. Be patient, and follow the illumination of my tail.”

With this adjuration, he conducted me to an open sarcophagus, gilded, and carved from end to end with hieroglyphics, that stood a little apart from the others. In it, with unutterable horror and anguish, I discerned the form of Kalilah, lying as if dead, with a mortal pallor on his cheeks, and lips, and eyelids. I noted that the bosom of his raiment was torn and bloody. I hurled myself upon him, and sought to revive him with kisses, but in vain.

Omoultakos, at this point, chose to interrupt my efforts by inserting the agile tip of his combustive tail between myself and the face of Kalilah. He observed, in a severe tone: “There is but one way in which the prince, your beloved brother, can be revived. The method, fortunately, lies at my immediate disposal. First, however, I will explain to you the presence of Kalilah in this place. The Émir Abou Taher Achmed, in attempting to continue the heroic education he designed for your brother, sent him forth with a small retinue the other day, to hunt the ferocious lions of the Nubian Desert. These lions, appearing in unwonted number, and with more than their usual rapacity, disposed of the followers of Kalilah, and would have served the prince in like manner, if some of my subordinate Jinns, who were

watching over the expedition, had not intervened. Unluckily, they were too late to keep Kalilah from being wounded almost to death by the talons of the beasts. They brought him here, only a few hours since, and I have permitted him to occupy the sarcophagus of an elder Pharaoh, though my wisdom has told me that the tenancy will be of brief duration, and that Kalilah can not be numbered among my permanent acquisitions. If you, Zulkaïs, will consent to a very simple matter, I will give into your hand, without delay, a supremely sovereign restorative."

"Anything! Anything!" I cried, wildly. "I consent to whatever you ask, if only Kalilah be brought back to life.

"You need promise only one thing," quoth Omoultakos. "Pledge your fealty to Eblis, the lord of the fiery globe, and the shadowy caverns."

"It is pledged," I replied, hastily. "Give me the restorative."

Omoulkatos, with his apish fingers, began to fumble in the tattered pouch that hung at his girdle. I caught sight of certain highly nauseating oddments, from among which, presently, he produced a pale yellow fruit, having somewhat the form and size of a peach, and laid it in the palm of my hand.

"This fruit," he informed me, "was grown in a garden which, without ever having beheld the sun, is more fertile than the gardens of Irem. If you squeeze it very gently above the lips of Kalilah, a single drop of its juice, falling down upon them, will suffice to resuscitate him in all the bloom that you have loved so dearly. The fruit, after that, is yours to retain; but I trust that you will not be so careless as to devour it at any future time. If you were to do this, the results would be very surprising, since the action of the juice on those who languish at the gates of death, and those who exult in the fulness of life, is an altogether different thing."

Scarcely heeding any of his words, I hastened to squeeze the yellow fruit above Kalilah's lips, which were white as those of a cadaver. I was transported with joy when a living ruby returned into them beneath the dripping of the fluid, and the eyes of Kalilah opened, to give back my ardent gaze. He lifted his arms from the sarcophagus to embrace me, and I quite forgot the presence of Omoultakos. That personage, after a decorous interval, observed in a loud voice: "I am sorry to break in upon your reunion, since I cannot do otherwise than approve and admire the fervor which animates you, but it is more than probable that I shall have, before

long, another use for the receptacle you are both occupying. For that reason, I shall conduct you to an alcove beyond my treasury. This alcove is fitted with comfortable couches that will serve your purpose fully as well."

Kalilah, rearing his head at the sound of Omoultakos' voice, perceived, for the first time, the remarkable baboon, who had hitherto been screened from his view by my bosom. He, in his turn, was no less amazed than I had been. However, heeding the injunction of our host, he got up from the sarcophagus. In low tones, I begged him to repress the injudicious laughter that quivered visibly upon his countenance. We both followed Omoultakos. As we went, I placed the yellow fruit in the bosom of my garment.

Kalilah, more impressed by the person of our guide than by the doleful surroundings, could not forbear commenting on the igneous properties of the tail, which emitted showers of sparks on the gloom, as the owner flourished it in his progress. He remarked to me, in great wonder, that the baboon seemed to experience no discomfort whatever from this unique process of combustion. Omoultakos, who had overheard him, turned and said: "Know, young prince, that it is the nature of my tail to burn in this manner, and the sensation it affords me is, in its degree, no more painful, or extraordinary, than that which women experience from the flushing of their cheeks, or men from an excitement of the blood."

After a journey that appeared brief indeed, and which I could not reconcile with my former impression of the vastness of the chamber, we came to an open portal. The flambeau of Omoultakos, reared aloft, illumined for us a much smaller room, with couches of golden cloth, and dark draperies. My father would have loved the draperies, since they were entirely covered with hieroglyphics; but the hieroglyphics, which appeared to change altogether from moment to moment, would have maddened the Sages whom he employed. Here the Jinn left us, after lighting with his torch the many lamps of brass, and copper censers, with which the room had been supplied. I thought that this departure was attended by an odd lack of ceremony, but recalled that he had come down from the pillar, on the occasion of his appearance before me, in a manner no less informal. Through the open doorway, Kalilah and I continued, for some time, to see the luminosity that he made in his movements about the treasury. He seemed to be very busy, and we caught glimpses of certain peculiar assistants, who were bringing in a new lot of treasures. But our joy in being

together once more, preoccupied us so fully, that we paid little heed to these activities, and were enabled to disregard, for the time being, their somewhat sinister import.

Between our caresses, we asked each other a thousand questions, and told all that had happened to us severally, since the date of our separation. Kalilah was much dismayed when he learned the circumstances of my visit to the underground palace, and the promise I had made, on his behalf, to the Jinn. “Alas!” he said, “I fear that all this has been prearranged, and for no good purpose. The lions who attacked me were of supernatural size and fierceness. No doubt they were the very Jinns of whom Omoultakos told you, and after their talons had slain my followers, and had rendered me senseless, they brought me here. You, Zulkaïs, through your affection for me, have entered the trap. However, let us try to forget this. No matter how dark and precarious our situation, we have at least the consolation of each other’s society.”

“All that I have done was nothing,” I replied. “Gladly would I pledge myself to Eblis a thousand times, for your sake.”

In such converse, the hours went by, and we began to wonder at the long absence of Omoultakos, who had vanished after a while among the pillars of the treasury, and had not returned. He had left us without declaring his intentions as to our future destiny, and it seemed that he had forgotten us. Moreover, he had made no provision for us, beyond lighting the lamps and censers. By the illumination that these vessels yielded, we began to remark the moth-holes in the figured hangings, and the great age of the couches, whose coverings might have been exhumed from palaces long buried in the desert sand. We noted, also, that the lamps and censers were overspread with verdigris. The fumes of the latter vessels troubled us, being both musty and aromatic, like the balms that exhale from the cerements of the Pharaohs. We heard, at intervals, equivocal and disquieting sounds, in a direction of which we were not sure. Together with all this, I grew faint with hunger, but there were no viands in the room for my regalement. At last, I remembered the fruit which I had placed in my bosom, after using it to revive Kalilah. Forgetful of the warning of the Jinn, I drew it forth. I would have shared it with Kalilah, but he, noting my hunger, declined. I devoured it greedily, finding a strange and spicy savor in its pulp.

Almost immediately, I experienced a feeling of unbearable heat, an intense ardour of life rose within me, as if it would burst the confines of my heart. The chamber seemed to blaze with a light that was not that of the lamps. My senses burned with a confused delirium of desires, a madness possessed me, and Kalilah was lost to my perception, like the shadows of the apartment. Then I thought that a ball of fire, hued with a thousand colors that changed momently, swam up and floated before me in the air. An extravagant longing seized me, to possess the ball, and I sprang to my feet and tried to clasp it, but the globe eluded me, and fled swiftly, and I, without heeding the cries of Kalilah, pursued it. I ran through a small portal at the rear of the chamber, and down a labyrinth of cavernous corridors, which, save for the illumination of the globe, would have been altogether lightless. Intent only on overtaking the bright ball, I did not notice my surroundings, or the route I followed. At last, the light disappeared, leaving only a dim glimmer, like the afterglow of the sunken sun, and I came to the verge of a precipice. Far below, the ball receded, plunging into abysses from which the dismal and eternal roaring of lost waters came up to arrest me. However, in my delirium, I should still have followed the globe, if it had not seemed, after an interval, to return toward me from the depths. I waited, ready to seize it, but, as the light drew nearer, I perceived its true source. It was Omoultakos, climbing nimbly from the gulf, by means of the slight projections of the stone.

In an instant, he stood beside me, and said, with an air of reproof: “Princess, why this haste to fling yourself into the underground river that flows eternally toward the realms of Eblis? The destined hour of your departure thither, borne by that doleful tide, is not yet at hand. Fortunately, I met your brother, who was seeking you in the darkness of the caverns; and, learning what had happened, I came without delay, by another route than yours, to intercept you. Kalilah, in consideration of this act of succor, has plighted himself to the prince of the fiery globe, and the flaming hearts. Let us rejoin him, for I fear that he still wanders, lost and distracted, in the darkness. In a sense, I am to blame for what has occurred. Carried away by the duties of my custodianship of the treasury—duties that are often exigent—I forgot the obligations of a host, and failed to provide for your natural needs. If I had done as I should, hunger would never have prompted you to devour the fruit that gave rise to your delirium.”

My madness had abated. I followed Omoultakos, perceiving, as I went, the horrors of the labyrinth of caverns, to which the orb with the thousand colors had blinded me. At every turn, there were scattered bones, and skeletons, which had belonged, mayhap, to wretches who had lost themselves in the maze, and had perished of famine. Some of the skeletons lay close together, but I could not tell whether the intimacy of their postures had been dictated by human love, or anthropophagism. Omoultakos did not enlighten me upon this point, nor did I care to question him. At last, we found Kalilah, whose joy was little less extravagant than the delirium which had led me to the floating ball.

"I must provide more adequately for your entertainment," said Omoultakos. "Eblis permits me to keep you here a while, as my guests. My subterranean garden lies not far away, and in it is a pavilion, which you may occupy. Food and drink will be served regularly to you, and in plenteous quantities, and I trust that neither of you will be tempted, in view of what has occurred, to sample the fruit of my trees."

He conducted us along a short passage, from which we emerged into an immense cavern whose roof was purple like the vault of night, and was starred with effulgent ores that resembled the planets and the constellations. Here we beheld the garden of which he had spoken. It consisted of fantastic trees, heavily laden with divers fruits and blossoms and cunningly illumed by lamps, which, very often, I could not distinguish from the fruits. In the midst was a small pavilion, built of a marble mottled with rose and black. It was furnished with luxurious divans, and a table on which delicious viands, and wines like molten ruby and topaz, had been spread for our refection. Omoultakos, after again assuring us of his hospitality, begged leave to excuse himself, and departed with the same celerity that had marked his former movements.

In the pavilion he had placed at our disposal, Kalilah and I dwelt for a period of time that neither of us could calculate. That period, however, in spite of certain forebodings, was the happiest we had known, since our childhood days when the Émir was still content to leave us together without interruption. In that place, there was no difference between day and night: for the lamps burned eternally amid the fruited foliage, and the starlike ores continued to sparkle ever in the vault above us. Often we wandered through the garden, which had a strange beauty, though we did not care, after certain

indiscreet delvings, to examine too closely into its hidden particulars. The odours of the blossoms, richer than myrrh and santal, conduced to an agreeable languor; and since the Jinn supplied us with an infinity of savorous foods, and wines more delicate than those of Persia, we were well content to leave his fruits alone. In the happiness of being together, and in transports renewed perpetually, we almost forgot the rash pledges we had given. Nor were we troubled overmuch by the fact that the attendants who served us were invisible, and gave proof of their presence only by a sound that resembled the noise made by the flittering of great bats. Also, for the most part, we found ourselves able to ignore a sullen roaring that pervaded the garden continually, seeming to issue from subterranean waters, at a vague distance, and in a direction of which we were never sure. Indeed, we became so accustomed to the sound, mournful and menacing though it was, that it seemed to us little more than a quality of the silence in which we were sequestered.

Our host, who was no doubt busily engaged with the care of his acquisitions, and the treasure confided to him by the cabalist rulers, failed to visit us again. We remarked his negligence, but under the circumstances, we did not miss him.

Alas! Though we knew it not, or strove to forget it, the malign forces of our destiny were always at work. Our sojourn in the garden of Omoultakos was to have a frightful denouement. By virtue of the allegiance we had both pledged to the Lord of Evil, we were to share, at the appointed time, the fate of all others who have thus damned themselves irretrievably. And yet—in order to live again those happy hours—I, and Kalilah, too, would repeat the same bond without hesitation. Dream not that we repent.

We were plighting other vows, as we had done a thousand times, and were seated upon a divan in the pavilion, when the date of perdition arrived. It came without announcement, save an insupportable thunder, that seemed to rive apart the foundations of the world. We were tossed as if by earthquake, the air darkened around us, and the ground gave way. Clasped in each other’s arms, we had the sensation of falling, together with the pavilion, into a deep abyss. The thunder ceased, the vertigo of our descent grew less, and we heard on every side the woeful and furious noise of rushing waters. A melancholy glimmering dawned about us, and by it, we saw the pavilion had become a raft of serpents plaited together in the

fashion of reeds, that was borne headlong on a dark tumultuous river. The serpents, large and rigid as beams of wood, had preserved on their skins the black and rosy mottling of the marble, and they had formed themselves into a cabin around us, like the superstructure of the pavilion. As we went, they added a loud and sinister hissing to the sound of the driven waters.

In this horrible manner, we were carried through unfathomable caves, ever deeper, toward the accursed realms of Eblis. Night surrounded us, we beheld no longer the least ray or glimmer, and, clasped tightly in each other's embrace, we sought by means of such contact to mitigate the noisome clamminess of the reptiles, and the terror of our situation. Thus we seemed to go on for a length of time that was equivalent to many days.

At last, a light broke upon us, lurid and doleful, and the clamor of the river deepened, with a thunder of mighty waterfalls before us. We thought surely that the torrent would precipitate us over some fatal verge, but at this point, the serpents of our raft began to exert themselves, and swimming vigorously, they landed us in the halls of Eblis, not far from that place where the Sultan Soliman listens eternally to the tumult of the cataract, and waits for the release that will come to him only with its cessation. After that, preserving no longer the form of a raft, they reentered the stream, and swam back separately, in the direction of the garden of Omoultakos. Now, lord, we await, even as you, the moment when our hearts shall be kindled with the unconsuming fire, and shall burn brightly as the tail of the baboon —but, alas!—shall derive unutterable anguish, like the hearts of all other mortals, from that flame in which is the ecstasy of demons.

THIRTEEN PHANTASMS

***Fantasy Magazine*, March 1936**

I have been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion."

John Alvington tried to raise himself on the pillow as he murmured in his thoughts the long-familiar refrain of Dowson's lyric. But his head and shoulders fell back in an overflooding helplessness, and there trickled through his brain, like a thread of icy water, the realization that perhaps the doctor had been right—perhaps the end was indeed imminent. He thought briefly of embalming fluids, immortelles, coffin nails and falling sods; but such ideas were quite alien to his trend of mind, and he preferred to think of Elspeth. He dismissed his mortuary musings with an appropriate shudder.

He often thought of Elspeth, these days. But of course he had never really forgotten her at any time. Many people called him a rake; but he knew, and had always known, that they were wrong. It was said that he had broken, or materially dented, the hearts of twelve women, including those of his two wives; and strangely enough, in view of the exaggerations commonly characteristic of gossip, the number was correct. Yet he, John Alvington, knew to a certainty that only one woman, who no one reckoned among the twelve, had ever really mattered in his life.

He had loved Elspeth and no one else; he had lost her through a boyish quarrel which was never made up, and she had died a year later. The other women were all mistakes, mirages: they had attracted him only because he fancied, for varying periods, that he had found in them something of Elspeth. He had been cruel to them perhaps, and most certainly he had not been faithful. But in forsaking them, had he not been all the truer to Elspeth?

Somehow his mental image of her was more distinct today than in years. As if a gathering dust had been wiped away from a portrait, he saw with strange clearness the elfin teasing of her eyes and the light tossing of brown curls that always accompanied her puckish laughter. She was tall—unexpectedly tall for so fairylike a person, but all the more admirable thereby; and he had never liked any but tall women.

How often he had been startled, as if by a ghost, in meeting some women with a similar mannerism, a similar figure or expression of eyes or cadence of voice; and how complete had been his disillusionment when he came to see the unreality and fallaciousness of the resemblance. How irreparably she, the true love, had come sooner or later between him and all the others.

He began to recall things that he had almost forgotten, such as the carnelian cameo brooch she had worn on the day of their first meeting, and a tiny mole on her left shoulder, of which he had once had a glimpse when she was wearing a dress unusually low-necked for that period. He remembered too the plain gown of pale green that clung so deliciously to her slender form on that morning when he had flung away with a curt good-bye, never to see her again.…

Never, he thought to himself, had his memory been so good: surely the doctor was mistaken, for there was no failing of his faculties. It was quite impossible that he should be mortally ill, when he could summon all his recollections of Elspeth with such ease and clarity.

Now he went over all the days of their seven months' engagement, which might have ended in a felicitous marriage if it had not been for her propensity to take unreasonable offense, and for his own answering flash of temper and want of conciliatory tactics in the crucial quarrel. How near, how poignant it all seemed. He wondered what malign providence had ordered their parting and had sent him on a vain quest from face to illusory face for the remainder of his life.

He did not, could not remember the other women—only that he had somehow dreamed for a little while that they resembled Elspeth. Others might consider him a Don Juan: but he knew himself for a hopeless sentimentalist, if there ever had been one.

What was that sound? he wondered. Had someone opened the door of the room? It must be the nurse, for no one else ever came at that hour in the evening. The nurse was a nice girl, though not at all like Elspeth. He tried to turn a little so that he could see her, and somehow succeeded, by a titanic effort altogether disproportionate to the feeble movement.

It was not the nurse after all, for she was always dressed in immaculate white befitting her profession. This woman wore a dress of cool, delectable green, pale as the green of shoaling sea-water. He could not see her face, for she stood with back turned to the bed; but there was something oddly

familiar in that dress, something that he could not quite remember at first. Then, with a distinct shock, he knew that it resembled the dress worn by Elspeth on the day of their quarrel, the same dress he had been picturing to himself a little while before. No one ever wore a gown of that length and style nowadays. Who on earth could it be? There was a queer familiarity about her figure, too, for she was quite tall and slender.

The woman turned, and John Alvington saw that it was Elspeth—the very Elspeth from whom he had parted with a bitter farewell, and who had died without ever permitting him to see her again. Yet how could it be but Elspeth, when she had been dead so long? Then, by a swift transition of logic, how could she have ever died, since she was here before him now? It seemed so infinitely preferable to believe that she still lived, and he wanted so much to speak to her, but his voice failed him when he tried to utter her name.

Now he thought that he heard the door open again, and became aware that another woman stood in the shadows behind Elspeth. She came forward, and he observed that she wore a green dress identical in every detail with that worn by his beloved. She lifted her head—and the face was that of Elspeth, with the same teasing eyes and whimsical mouth! But how could there be two Elspeths?

In profound bewilderment, he tried to accustom himself to the bizarre idea; and even as he wrestled with a problem so unaccountable, a third figure in pale green, followed by a fourth and a fifth came in and stood beside the first two. Nor were these the last, for others entered one by one, till the room was filled with women, all of whom wore the raiment and the semblance of his dead sweetheart. None of them uttered a word, but all looked at Alvington with a gaze in which he now seemed to discern a deeper mockery than the elfin tantalizing he had once found in the eyes of Elspeth.

He lay very still, fighting with a dark, terrible perplexity. How could there be such a multitude of Elspeths, when he could remember knowing only one? And how many were there, anyway? Something prompted him to count them, and he found that there were thirteen of the specters in green. And having ascertained this fact, he was struck by something familiar about the number. Didn’t people say that he had broken the hearts of thirteen

women? Or was the total only twelve? Anyway, if you counted Elspeth herself, who had really broken his heart, there would be thirteen.

Now all the woman began to toss their curly heads, in a manner he recalled so well, and all of them laughed with a light and puckish laughter. Could they be laughing at him? Elspeth had often done that but he had loved her devotedly nevertheless.…

All at once, he began to feel uncertain about the precise number of figures that filled his room; it seemed to him at one moment that there were more than he had counted, and then that there were fewer. He wondered which one among them was the true Elspeth, for after all he felt sure that there had never been a second—only a series of women apparently resembling her, who were not really like her at all when you came to know them.

Finally, as he tried to count them and scrutinize the thronging faces, all of them grew dim and confused and indistinct, and he half forgot what he was trying to do. Which one was Elspeth? Or had there ever been a real Elspeth? He was not sure of anything at the last, when oblivion came, and he passed to that realm in which there are neither women nor phantoms nor love nor numerical problems.

THE CHARNEL GOD

***Weird Tales*, March 1934.**

"Mordiggian is the god of Zul-Bha-Sair," said the innkeeper with unctuous solemnity. "He has been the god from years that are lost to man's memory in shadow deeper than the subterranes of his black temple. There is no other god in Zul-Bha-Sair. And all who die within the walls of the city are sacred to Mordiggian. Even the kings and the optimates, at death, are delivered into the hands of his muffled priests. It is the law and the custom. A little while, and the priests will come for your bride."

"But Elaith is not dead," protested the youth Phariom for the third or fourth time, in piteous desperation. "Her malady is one that assumes the lying likeness of death. Twice before has she lain insensible, with a pallor upon her cheeks and a stillness in her very blood, that could hardly be distinguished from those of the tomb; and twice she has awakened after an interim of days."

The innkeeper peered with an air of ponderous unbelief at the girl who lay white and motionless as a mown lily on the bed in the poorly furnished attic chamber.

"In that case you should not have brought her into Zul-Bha-Sair," he averred in a tone of owlish irony. "The physician has pronounced her dead; and her death has been reported to the priests. She must go to the temple of Mordiggian."

"But we are outlanders, guests of a night. We have come from the land of Xylac, far in the north; and this morning we should have gone on through Tasuun, toward Pharaad, the capital of Yoros, which lies near to the southern sea. Surely your god could have no claim upon Elaith, even if she were truly dead."

"All who die in Zul-Bha-Sair are the property of Mordiggian," insisted the taverner sententiously. "Outlanders are not exempt. The dark maw of his temple yawns eternally, and no man, no child, no woman, throughout the years, has evaded its yawning. All mortal flesh must become, in due time, the provender of the god."

Phariom shuddered at the oily and portentous declaration.

“Dimly have I heard of Mordiggian, as a legend that travellers tell in Xylac,” he admitted. “But I had forgotten the name of his city; and Elaith and I came ignorantly into Zul-Bha-Sair… Even had I known, I should have doubted the terrible custom of which you inform me. …What manner of deity is this, who imitates the hyena and the vulture? Surely he is no god, but a ghoul.”

“Take heed lest you utter blasphemy,” admonished the innkeeper. “Mordiggian is old and omnipotent as death. He was worshipped in former continents, before the lifting of Zothique from out the sea. Through him, we are saved from corruption and the worm. Even as the people of other places devote their dead to the consuming flame, so we of Zul-Bha-Sair deliver ours to the god. Awful is the fane, a place of terror and obscure shadow untrod by the sun, into which the dead are borne by his priests and are laid on a vast table of stone to await his coming from the nether vault in which he dwells. No living men, other than the priests, have ever beheld him; and the faces of the priests are hidden behind masks of silver, and even their hands are shrouded, that men may not gaze on them that have seen Mordiggian.”

“But there is a king in Zul-Bha-Sair, is there not? I shall appeal to him against this heinous and horrible injustice. Surely he will heed me.”

“Phenquor is the king; but he could not help you even if he wished. Your appeal will not even be heard. Mordiggian is above all kings, and his law is sacred. Hark!—for already the priests come.”

Phariom, sick at heart with the charnel terror and cruelty of the doom that impended for his girlish wife in this unknown city of nightmare, heard an evil, stealthy creaking on the stairs that led to the attic of the inn. The sound drew nearer with inhuman rapidity, and four strange figures came into the room, heavily garbed in funereal purple, and wearing huge masks of silver graven in the likeness of skulls. It was impossible to surmise their actual appearance, for, even as the taverner had hinted, their very hands were concealed by fingerless gloves; and the purple gowns came down in loose folds that trailed about their feet like unwinding cerecloths. There was a horror about them, of which the macabre masks were only a lesser element; a horror that lay partly in their unnatural, crouching attitudes, and the beastlike agility with which they moved, unhampered by their cumbrous habiliments.

Among them, they carried a curious bier, made from interwoven strips of leather, and with monstrous bones that served for frame and handles. The leather was greasy and blackened as if from long years of mortuary use. Without speaking to Phariom or the innkeeper, and with no delay or formality of any sort, they advanced toward the bed on which Elaith was lying.

Undeterred by their more than formidable aspect, and wholly distraught with grief and anger, Phariom drew from his girdle a short knife, the only weapon he possessed. Disregarding the minatory cry of the taverner, he rushed wildly upon the muffled figures. He was quick and muscular, and, moreover, was clad in light, close-fitting raiment, such as would seemingly have given him a brief advantage.

The priests had turned their backs upon him; but, as if they had foreseen his every action, two of them wheeled about with the swiftness of tigers, dropping the handles of bone that they carried. One of them struck the knife from Phariom's hand with a movement that the eye could barely follow in its snaky darting. Then both assailed him, beating him back with terrible flailing blows of their shrouded arms, and hurling him half across the room into an empty corner. Stunned by his fall, he lay senseless for a term of minutes.

Recovering glazedly, with eyes that blurred as he opened them, he beheld the fact of the stout taverner stooping above him like a tallow-colored moon. The thought of Elaith, more sharp than the thrust of a dagger, brought him back to agonizing consciousness. Fearfully he scanned the shadowy room, and, saw that the cerемented priests were gone, that the bed was vacant. He heard the orotund and sepulchral croaking of the taverner.

"The priests of Mordiggian are merciful, they make allowance for the frenzy and distraction of the newly bereaved. It is well for you that they are compassionate, and considerate of mortal weakness."

Phariom sprang erect, as if his bruised and aching body were scorched by a sudden fire. Pausing only to retrieve his knife, which still lay in the middle of the room, he started toward the door. He was stopped by the hand of the hosteler, clutching greasily at his shoulder.

"Beware, lest you exceed the bounds of the mercy of Mordiggian. It is an ill thing to follow his priests—and a worse thing to intrude upon the deathly and sacred gloom of his temple."

Phariom scarcely heard the admonition. He wrenched himself hastily away from the odious fingers and turned to go; but again the hand clutched him.

“At least, pay me the money that you owe for food and lodging, ere you depart,” demanded the innkeeper. “Also, there is the matter of the physician’s fee, which I can settle for you, if you will entrust me with the proper sum. Pay now—for there is no surety that you will return.”

Phariom drew out the purse that contained his entire worldly wealth, and filled the greedily cupped palm before him with coins that he did not pause to count. With no parting word or backward glance, he descended the moldy and musty stairs of the worm-eaten hostelry, as if spurred by an incubus, and went out into the gloomy, serpentine streets of Zul-Bha-Sair.

Perhaps the city differed little from others, except in being older and darker; but to Phariom, in his extremity of anguish, the ways that he followed were like subterrene corridors that led only to some profound and monstrous charnel. The sun had risen above the overjutting houses, but it seemed to him that there was no light, other than a lost and doleful glimmering such as might descend into mortuary depths. The people, it may have been, were much like other people, but he saw them under a malefic aspect, as if they were ghouls and demons that went to and fro on the ghastly errands of a necropolis.

Bitterly, in his distraction, he recalled the previous evening, when he had entered Zul-Bha-Sair at twilight with Elaith, the girl riding on the one dromedary that had survived their passage of the northern desert, and he walking beside her, weary but content. With the rosy purple of afterglow upon its walls and cupolas, with the deepening golden eyes of its lit windows, the place had seemed a fair and nameless city of dreams, and they had planned to rest there for a day or two before resuming the long, arduous journey to Pharaad, in Yoros.

This journey had been undertaken only through necessity. Phariom, an impoverished youth of noble blood, had been exiled because of the political and religious tenets of his family, which were not in accord with those of the reigning emperor, Caleppos. Taking his newly wedded wife, Phariom had set out for Yoros, where certain allied branches of the house to which he belonged had already established themselves, and would give him a fraternal welcome.

They had travelled with a large caravan of merchants, going directly southward to Tasuun. Beyond the borders of Xylac, amid the red sands of the Celotian waste, the caravan had been attacked by robbers, who had slain many of its members and dispersed the rest. Phariom and his bride, escaping with their dromedaries, had found themselves lost and alone in the desert, and, failing to regain the road toward Tasuun, had taken inadvertently another track, leading to Zul-Bha-Sair, a walled metropolis on the south-western verge of the waste, which their itinerary had not included.

Entering Zul-Bha-Sair, the couple had repaired for reasons of economy to a tavern in the humbler quarter. There, during the night, Elaith had been overcome by the third seizure of the cataleptic malady to which she was liable. The earlier seizures, occurring before her marriage to Phariom, had been recognized in their true character by the physicians of Xylac, and had been palliated by skillful treatment. It was hoped that the malady would not recur. The third attack, no doubt, had been induced by the fatigues and hardships of the journey. Phariom had felt sure that Elaith would recover, but a doctor of Zul-Bha-Sair, hastily summoned by the innkeeper, had insisted that she was actually dead; and, in obedience to the strange law of the city, had reported her without delay to the priests of Mordiggian. The frantic protests of the husband had been utterly ignored.

There was, it seemed, a diabolic fatality about the whole train of circumstances through which Elaith, still living, though with that outward aspect of the tomb which her illness involved, had fallen into the grasp of the devotees of the charnel god. Phariom pondered this fatality almost to madness, as he strode with furious, aimless haste along the eternally winding and crowded streets.

To the cheerless information received from the taverner, he added, as he went on, more and more of the tardily remembered legends which he had heard in Xylac. Ill and dubious indeed was the renown of Zul-Bha-Sair, and he marvelled that he should have forgotten it, and cursed himself with black curses for the temporary but fatal forgetfulness. Better would it have been if he and Elaith had perished in the desert, rather than enter the wide gates that stood always open, gaping for their prey, as was the custom of Zul-Bha-Sair.

The city was a mart of trade, where outland travelers came, but did not care to linger, because of the repulsive cult of Mordiggian, the invisible

eater of the dead, who was believed to share his provender with the shrouded priests. It was said that the bodies lay for days in the dark temple and were not devoured till corruption had begun. And people whispered of fouler things than necrophagism, of blasphemous rites that were solemnized in the ghoul-ridden vaults, and nameless uses to which the dead were put before Mordiggian claimed them. In all outlying places, the fate of those who died in Zul-Bha-Sair was a dreadful byword and a malediction. But to the people of that city, reared in the faith of the ghoulish god, it was merely the usual and expected mode of mortuary disposal. Tombs, graves, catacombs, funeral pyres, and other such nuisances, were rendered needless by this highly utilitarian deity.

Phariom was surprised to see the people of the city going about the common businesses of life. Porters were passing with bales of household goods upon their shoulders. Merchants were squatting in their shops like other merchants. Buyers and sellers chaffered loudly in the public bazaars. Women laughed and chattered in the door ways. Only by their voluminous robes of red, black and violet, and their strange, uncouth accents, was he able to distinguish the men of Zul-Bha-Sair from those who were outlanders like himself. The murk of nightmare began to lift from his impressioms; and gradually, as he went on, the spectacle of everyday humanity all about him helped to calm a little his wild distraction and desperation. Nothing could dissipate the horror of his loss, and the abominable fate that threatened Elaith. But now, with a cool logic born of the cruel exigence, he began to consider the apparently hopeless problem of rescuing her from the ghoul god’s temple.

He composed his features, and constrained his febrile pacing to an idle saunter, so that none might guess the preoccupations that racked him inwardly. Pretending to be interested in the wares of a seller of men’s apparel, he drew the dealer into converse regarding Zul-Bha-Sair and its customs, and made such inquiries as a traveler from far lands might make. The dealer was talkative, and Phariom soon learned from him the location of the temple of Mordiggian, which stood at the city’s core. He also learned that the temple was open at all hours, and that people were free to come and go within its precincts. There were, however, no rituals of worship, other than certain private rites that were celebrated by the priesthood. Few cared to enter the fane, because of a superstition that any living person who

intruded upon its gloom would return to it shortly as the provender of the god.

Mordiggian, it seemed, was a benign deity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Zul-Bha-Sair. Curiously enough, no definite personal attributes were ascribed to him. He was, so to speak, an impersonal force akin to the elements—a consuming and cleansing power, like fire. His hierophants were equally mysterious; they lived at the temple and emerged from it only in the execution of their funeral duties. No one knew the manner of their recruiting, but many believed that they were both male and female, thus renewing their numbers from generation to generation with no ulterior commerce. Others thought that they were not human beings at all, but an order of subterranean earth-entities, who lived for ever, and who fed upon corpses like the god himself. Through this latter belief, of late years, a minor heresy had risen, some holding that Mordiggian was a mere hieratic figment, and the priests were the sole devourers of the dead. The dealer, quoting this heresy, made haste to disavow it with pious reprobation.

Phariom chatted for awhile on other topics, and then continued his progress through the city, going as forthrightly toward the temple as the obliquely running thoroughfares would permit. He had formed no conscious plan, but desired to reconnoiter the vicinage. In that which the garment-dealer had told him, the one reassuring detail was the openness of the fane and its accessibility to all who dared enter. The rarity of visitors, however, would make Phariom conspicuous, and he wished above all to avoid attention. On the other hand, any effort to remove bodies from the temple was seemingly unheard of—a thing audacious beyond the dreams of the people of Zul-Bha-Sair. Through the very boldness of his design, he might avoid suspicion, and succeed in rescuing Elaith.

The streets that he followed began to tend downward, and were narrower, dimmer and more tortuous than any he had yet traversed. He thought for awhile that he had lost his way, and he was about to ask the passersby to redirect him, when four of the priests of Mordiggian, bearing one of the curious litter-like biers of bone and leather, emerged from an ancient alley just before him.

The bier was occupied by the body of a girl, and for one moment of convulsive shock and agitation that left him trembling, Phariom thought that the girl was Elaith. Looking again, he saw his mistake. The gown that

the girl wore, though simple, was made of some rare exotic stuff. Her features, though pale as those of Elaith, were crowned with curls like the petals of heavy black poppies. Her beauty, warm and voluptuous even in death, differed from the blond pureness of Elaith as tropic lilies differ from narcissi.

Quietly, and maintaining a discreet interval, Phariom followed the sullenly shrouded figures and their lovely burden. He saw that people made way for the passage of the bier with awed, unquestioning alacrity; and the loud voices of hucksters and chafferers were hushed as the priests went by. Overhearing a murmured conversation between two of the townsfolk, he learned that the dead girl was Arctela, daughter of Quaos, a high noble and magistrate of Zul-Bha-Sair. She had died very quickly and mysteriously, from a cause unknown to the physicians, which had not marred or wasted her beauty in the least. There were those who held that an indetectable poison, rather than disease, had been the agency of death; and others deemed her the victim of malefic sorcery.

The priests went on, and Phariom kept them in sight as well as he could in the blind tangle of streets. The way steepened, without affording any clear prospect of the levels below, and the houses seemed to crowd more closely, as if huddling back from a precipice. Finally the youth emerged behind his macabre guides in a sort of circular hollow at the city's heart, where the temple of Mordiggian loomed alone and separate amid pavements of sad onyx, and funerary cedars whose green had blackened as if with the undeparting charnel shadows bequeathed by dead ages.

The edifice was built of a strange stone, hued as with the blackish purple of carnal decay: a stone that refused the ardent luster of noon, and the prodigality of dawn or sunset glory. It was low and windowless, having the form of a monstrous mausoleum. Its portals yawned sepulchrally in the gloom of the cedars.

Phariom watched the priests as they vanished within the portals, carrying the girl Arctela like phantoms who bear a phantom burden. The broad area of pavement between the recoiling houses and the temple was now deserted, but he did not venture to cross it in the blare of betraying daylight. Circling the area, he saw that there were several other entrances to the great fane, all open and unguarded. There was no sign of activity about the place;

but he shuddered at the thought of that which was hidden within its walls, even as the feasting of worms is hidden in the marble tomb.

Like a vomiting of charnels, the abominations of which he had heard rose up before him in the sunlight; and again he drew close to madness, knowing that Elaith must lie among the dead, in the temple, with the foul umbrage of such things upon her, and that he, consumed with unremitting frenzy, must wait for the favorable shrouding of darkness before he could execute his nebulous, doubtful plan of rescue. In the meanwhile, she might awake, and perish from the mortal horror of her surroundings…or worse even than this might befall, if the whispered tales were true…

Abnon-Tha, sorcerer and necromancer, was felicitating himself on the bargain he had made with the priests of Mordiggian. He felt, perhaps justly, that no one less clever than he could have conceived and executed the various procedures that had made possible this bargain, through which Arctela, daughter of the proud Quaos, would became his unquestioning slave. No other lover, he told himself, could have been resourceful enough to obtain a desired woman in this fashion. Arctela, betrothed to Alos, a young noble of the city, was seemingly beyond the aspiration of a sorcerer. Abnon-Tha, however, was no common hedge-wizard, but an adept of long standing in the most awful and profound arcana of the black arts. He knew the spells that kill more quickly and surely than knife or poison, at a distance; and he knew also the darker spells by which the dead can be reanimated, even after years or ages of decay. He had slain Arctela in a manner that none could detect, with a rare and subtle invultuation that had left no mark; and her body lay now among the dead, in Mordiggian's temple. Tonight, with the tacit connivance of the terrible, shrouded priests, he would bring her back to life.

Abnon-Tha was not native to Zul-Bha-Sair, but had come many years before from the infamous, half-mythic isle of Sotar, lying somewhere to the east of the huge continent of Zothique. Like a sleek young vulture, he had established himself in the very shadow of the charnel fane, and had prospered, taking to himself pupils and assistants.

His dealings with the priests were long and extensive, and the bargain he had just made was far from being the first of its kind. They had allowed him the temporary use of bodies claimed by Mordiggian, stipulating only that these bodies should not be removed from the temple during the course of

any of his experiments in necromancy. Since the privilege was slightly irregular from their viewpoint, he had found it necessary to bribe them—not, however, with gold, but with the promise of a liberal purveyance of matters more sinister and corruptible than gold. The arrangement had been satisfactory enough to all concerned: cadavers had poured into the temple with more than their usual abundance ever since the coming of the sorcerer; the god had not lacked for provender; and Abnon-Tha had never lacked for subjects on which to employ his more baleful spells.

On the whole, Abnon-Tha was not ill-pleased with himself. He reflected, moreover, that, aside from his mastery of magic and his sleightful ingenuity, he was about to manifest a well-nigh unexampled courage. He had planned a robbery that would amount to dire sacrilege: the removal of the reanimated body of Arctela from the temple. Such robberies (either of animate or exanimate corpses) and the penalty attached to them, were a matter of legend only; for none had occurred in recent ages. Thrice terrible, according to common belief, was the doom of those who had tried and failed. The necromancer was not blind to the risks of his enterprise; nor, on the other hand, was he deterred or intimidated by them.

His two assistants, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, apprised of his intention, had made with all due privity the necessary preparations for their flight from Zul-Bha-Sair. The strong passion that the sorcerer had conceived for Arctela was not his only motive, perhaps, in removing from that city. He was desirous of change, for he had grown a little weary of the odd laws that really served to restrict his necromantic practices, while facilitating them in a sense. He planned to travel southward, and establish himself in one of the cities of Tasuun, an empire famous for the number and antiquity of its mummies.

It was now sunset-time. Five dromedaries, bred for racing, waited in the inner courtyard of Abnon-Tha's house, a high and moldering mansion that seemed to lean forward upon the open, circular area belonging to the temple. One of the dromedaries would carry a bale containing the sorcerer's most valuable books, manuscripts, and other impedimenta of magic. Its fellows would bear Abnon-Tha, the two assistants—and Arctela.

Narghai and Vemba-Tsith appeared before their master to tell him that all was made ready. Both were much younger than Abnon-Tha; but, like

himself, they were outlanders in Zul-Bha-Sair. They came of the swart and narrow-eyed people of Naat, an isle that was little less infamous than Sotar.

"It is well," said the necromancer, as they stood before him with lowered eyes, after making their announcement. "We have only to await the favorable hour. Midway between sunset and moonrise, when the priests are at their supper in the nether adytum, we will enter the temple and perform that which must be done for the rising of Arctela. They feed well tonight, for I know that many of the dead grow ripe on the great table in the upper sanctuary; and it may be that Mordiggian feeds also. None will come to watch us at our doings."

"But, master," said Narghai, shivering a little beneath his robe of nacarat red, "is it wise, after all, to do this thing? Must you take the girl from the temple? Always, ere this, you have contented yourself with the brief loan that the priests allow, and have rendered back the dead in the required state of exanimation. Truly, is it well to violate the law of the god? Men say that the wrath of Mordiggian, though seldom loosed, is more dreadful than the wrath of all other deities. For this reason, none has dared to defraud him in latter years, or attempt the removal of any of the corpses from his fane. Long ago, it is told, a high noble of the city bore hence the cadaver of a woman he had loved, and fled with it into the desert; but the priests pursued him, running more swiftly than jackals…and the fate that overtook him is a thing whereof the legends whisper but dimly."

"I fear neither Mordiggian nor his creatures," said Abnon-Tha, with a solemn vainglory in his voice. "My dromedaries can outrun the priests—even granting that the priests are not men at all, but ghouls, as some say. And there is small likelihood that they will follow us: after their feasting tonight, they will sleep like gorged vultures The morrow will find us far on the road to Tasuun, ere they awake."

"The master is right," interpolated Vemba-Tsith, "We have nothing to fear."

"But they say that Mordiggian does not sleep," insisted Narghai, "and that he watches all things eternally from his black vault beneath the temple."

"So I have heard," said Abnon-Tha, with a dry and learned air. "But I consider that such beliefs are mere superstition. There is nothing to confirm them in the real nature of corpse-eating entities. So far, I have never beheld

Mordiggian, either sleeping or awake; but in all likelihood he is merely a common ghoul. I know these demons and their habits. They differ from hyenas only through their monstrous shape and size, and their immortality."

"Still, I must deem it an ill thing to cheat Mordiggian," muttered Narghai beneath his breath.

The words were caught by the quick ears of AbnonTha. "Nay, there is no question of cheating. Well have I served Mordiggian and his priesthood, and amply have I larded their black table. Also, I shall keep, in a sense, the bargain I have made concerning Arctela: the providing of a new cadaver in return for my necromantic privilege. Tomorrow, the youth Alos, the betrothed of Arctela, will lie in her place among the dead. Go now, and leave me, for I must devise the inward invultuation that will rot the heart of Alos, like a worm that awakens at the core of fruit."

To Phariom, fevered and distraught, it seemed that the cloudless day went by with the sluggishness of a corpse-clogged river. Unable to calm his agitation, he wandered aimlessly through the thronged bazaars, till the western towers grew dark on a heaven of saffron flame, and the twilight rose like a gray and curdling sea among the houses. Then he returned to the inn where Elaith had been stricken, and claimed the dromedary which he had left in the tavern stables. Riding the animal through dim thoroughfares, lit only by the covert gleam of lamps or tapers from half-closed windows, he found his way once more to the city's center.

The dusk had thickened into darkness when he came to the open area surrounding Mordiggian's temple. The windows of mansions fronting the area were shut and lightless as dead eyes, and the fane itself, a colossal bulk of gloom, was rayless as any mausoleum beneath the gathering stars. No one, it seemed, was abroad, and though the quietude was favorable to his project, Phariom shivered with a chill of deathly menace and desolation. The hoofs of his camel rang on the pavement with a startling and preternatural clangor, and he thought that the ears of hidden ghouls, listening alertly behind the silence, must surely hear them.

However, there was no stirring of life in that sepulchral gloom. Reaching the shelter of one of the thick groups of ancient cedars, he dismounted and tied the dromedary to a low-growing branch. Keeping among the trees, like a shadow among shadows, he approached the temple with infinite wariness, and circled it slowly, finding that its four doorways, which corresponded to

the four quarters of the Earth, were all wide open, deserted, and equally dark. Returning at length to the eastern side, on which he had tethered his camel, he emboldened himself to enter the blackly gaping portal.

Crossing the threshold, he was engulfed instantly by a dead and clammy darkness, touched with the faint fetor of corruption, and a smell as of charred bone and flesh. He thought that he was in a huge corridor, and feeling his way forward along the right-hand wall, he soon came to a sudden turn, and saw a bluish glimmering far ahead, as if in some central adytum where the hall ended. Massy columns were silhouetted against the glimmering; and across it, as he drew nearer, several dark and muffled figures passed, presenting the profiles of enormous skulls. Two of them were sharing the burden of a human body which they carried in their arms. To Phariom, pausing in the shadowy hall, it appeared that the vague taint of putrescence upon the air grew stronger for a few instants after the figure had come and gone.

They were not succeeded by any others, and the fane resumed its mausolean stillness. But the youth waited for many minutes, doubtful and trepidant, before venturing to go on. An oppression of mortuary mystery thickened the air, and stifled him like the noisome effluvia of catacombs. His ears became intolerably acute, and he heard a dim humming, a sound of deep and viscid voices indistinguishably bent, that appeared to issue from crypts beneath the temple.

Stealing at length to the hall's end, he peered beyond into what was obviously the main sanctuary: a low and many-pillared room, whose vastness was but half-revealed by the bluish fires that glowed and flickered in numerous urnlike vessels borne aloft on slender stelae.

Phariom hesitated upon that awful threshold, for the mingled odors of burnt and decaying flesh were heavier on the air, as if he had drawn nearer to their sources; and the thick humming seemed to ascend from a dark stairway in the floor, beside the left-hand wall. But the room, to all appearance, was empty of life, and nothing stirred except the wavering lights and shadows. The watcher discerned the outlines of a vast table in the center, carved from the same black stone as the building itself. Upon the table, half lit by the flaming urns, or shrouded by the umbrage of the heavy columns, a number of people lay side by side; and Phariom knew that he

had found the black altar of Mordiggian, whereon were disposed the bodies claimed by the god.

A wild and stifling fear contended with a wilder hope in his bosom. Trembling, he went toward the table; and a cold clamminess, wrought by the presence of the dead, assailed him. The table was nearly thirty feet in length, and it rose waist-high on a dozen mighty legs. Beginning at the nearer end, he passed along the row of corpses, peering fearfully into each upturned face. Both sexes, and many ages and differing ranks were represented. Nobles and rich merchants were crowded by beggars in filthy rags. Some were newly dead, and others, it seemed, had lain there for days, and were beginning to show the marks of corruption. There were many gaps in the ordered row, suggesting that certain of the corpses had been removed. Phariom went on in the dim light, searching for the loved features of Elaith. At last, when he was nearing the further end, and had begun to fear that she was not among them, he found her.

With the cryptic pallor and stillness of her strange malady upon her, she lay unchanged on the chill stone. A great thankfulness was born in the heart of Phariom, for he felt sure that she was not dead—and that she had not awakened at any time to the horrors of the temple. If he could bear her away from the hateful purlieus of Zul-Bha-Sair without detection, she would recover from her death-simulating sickness.

Cursorily, he noted that another woman was lying beside Elaith, and recognized her as the beautiful Arctela, whose bearers he had followed almost to the portals of the fane. He gave her no second glance, but stooped to lift Elaith in his arms.

At that moment, he heard a murmur of low voices in the direction of the door by which he had entered the sanctuary. Thinking that some of the priests had returned, he dropped swiftly on hands and knees and crawled beneath the ponderous table, which afforded the only accessible hiding-place. Retreating into shadow beyond the glimmering shed from the lofty urns, he waited and looked out between the pillar-thick legs.

The voices grew louder, and he saw the curiously sandaled feet and shortish robes of three persons who approached the table of the dead and paused in the very spot where he himself had stood a few instants before. Who they were, he could not surmise; but their garments of light and swarthy red were not the shroudings of Mordiggian’s priests. He was

uncertain whether or not they had seen him; and crouching in the low space beneath the table, he plucked his dagger from its sheath.

Now, he was able to distinguish three voices, one solemn and unctuously imperative, one somewhat guttural and growling, and the other shrill and nasal. The accents were alien, differing from those of the men of Zul-Bha-Sair, and the words were often strange to Phariom. Also, much of the converse was inaudible.

"…here…at the end," said the solemn voice. "Be swift… We have no time to loiter."

"Yes, Master," came the growling voice. "But who is this other?… Truly, she is very fair."

A discussion seemed to take place, in discreetly lowered tones. Apparently the owner of the guttural voice was urging something that the other two opposed. The listener could distinguish only a word or two here and there; but he gathered that the name of the first person was Vembi-Tsith, and that the one who spoke in a nasal shrilling was called Narghai. At last, above the others, the grave accents of the man addressed only as the Master were clearly audible:

"I do not altogether approve… It will delay our departure…and the two must ride on one dromedary. But take her, Vemba-Tsith, if you can perform the necessary spells unaided. I have no time for a double incantation… It will be a good test of your proficiency."

There was a mumbling as of thanks or acknowledgment from Vemba-Tsith. Then the voice of the Master: "Be quiet now and make haste." To Phariom, wondering vaguely and uneasily as to the import of this colloquy, it seemed that two of the three men pressed closer to the table, as if stooping above the dead. He heard a rustling of cloth upon stone, and an instant later, he saw that all three were departing among the columns and stelae, in a direction opposite to that from which they had entered the sanctuary. Two of them carried burdens that glimmered palely and indistinctly in the shadows.

A black horror clutched at the heart of Phariom, for all too clearly he surmised the nature of those burdens and the possible identity of one of them. Quickly he crawled forth from his hiding-place and saw that Elaith was gone from the black table, together with the girl Arctela. He saw the vanishing of shadowy figures in the gloom that zoned the chamber's

western wall. Whether the abductors were ghouls, or worse than ghouls, he could not know, but he followed swiftly, forgetful of all caution in his concern for Elaith.

Reaching the wall, he found the mouth of a corridor, and plunged into it headlong. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, he saw a ruddy glimmering of light. Then he heard a sullen, metallic grating; and the glimmer narrowed to a slit-like gleam, as if the door of the chamber from which it issued were being closed.

Following the blind wall, he came to that slit of crimson light. A door of darkly tarnished bronze had been left ajar, and Phariom peered in on a weird, unholy scene, illumined by the blood-like flames that flared and soared unsteadily from high urns upborne on sable pedestals.

The room was full of a sensuous luxury that accorded strangely with the dull, funereal stone of that temple of death. There were couches and carpets of superbly figured stuffs, vermilion, gold, azure, silver; and jeweled censers of unknown metals stood in the corners. A low table at one side was littered with curious bottles, and occult appliances such as might be used in medicine or sorcery.

Elaith was lying on one of the couches, and near her, on a second couch, the body of the girl Arctela had been disposed. The abductors, whose faces Phariom now beheld for the first time, were busying themselves with singular preparations that mystified him prodigiously. His impulse to invade the room was repressed by a sort of wonder that held him enthralled and motionless.

One of the three, a tall, middle-aged man whom he identified as the Master, had assembled certain peculiar vessels, including a small brazier and a censer, and had set them on the floor beside Arctela. The second, a younger man with lecherously slitted eyes, had placed similar impedimenta before Elaith. The third, who was also young and evil of aspect, merely stood and looked on with an apprehensive, uneasy air.

Phariom divined that the men were sorcerers when, with a deftness born of long practice, they lit the censers and braziers, and began simultaneously the intonation of rhythmically measured words in a strange tongue accompanied by the sprinkling, at regular intervals, of black oils that fell with a great hissing on the coals in the braziers and sent up enormous clouds of pearly smoke. Dark threads of vapor serpentined from the censers,

interweaving themselves like veins through the dim, misshapen figures as of ghostly giants that were formed by the lighter fumes. A reek of intolerably acrid balsams filled the chamber, assailing and troubling the senses of Phariom, till the scene wavered before him and took on a dreamlike vastness, a narcotic distortion.

The voices of the necromancers mounted and fell as if in some unholy paean. Imperious, exigent, they seemed to implore the consummation of forbidden blasphemy. Like thronging phantoms, writhing and swirling with malignant life, the vapors rose about the couches on which lay the dead girl and the girl who bore the outward likeness of death.

Then, as the fumes were riven apart in their baleful seething, Phariom saw that the pale figure of Elaith had stirred like a sleeper who awakens, that she had opened her eyes and was lifting a feeble hand from the gorgeous couch. The younger necromancer ceased his chanting on a sharply broken cadence; but the solemn tones of the other still went on, and still there was a spell on the limbs and senses of Phariom, making it impossible for him to stir.

Slowly the vapors thinned like a rout of dissolving phantoms. The watcher saw that the dead girl, Arctela, was rising to her feet like a somnambulist. The chanting of Abnon-Tha, standing before her, came sonorously to an end. In the awful silence that followed, Phariom heard a weak cry from Elaith, and then the jubilant, growling voice of Vemba-Tsith, who was stooping above her:

“Behold, O Abnon-Tha! My spells are swifter than yours, for she that I have chosen awakened before Arctela!”

Phariom was released from his thralldom, as if through the lifting of an evil enchantment. He flung back the ponderous door of darkened bronze, that ground with protesting clangors on its hinges. His dagger drawn, he rushed into the room.

Elaith, her eyes wide with piteous bewilderment, turned toward him and made an ineffectual effort to arise from the couch. Arctela, mute and submissive before Abnon-Tha, appeared to heed nothing but the will of the necromancer. She was like a fair and soulless automaton. The sorcerers, turning as Phariom entered, sprang back with instant agility before his onset, and drew the short, cruelly crooked swords which they all carried. Narghai struck the knife from Phariom’s fingers with a darting blow that

shattered its thin blade at the hilt, and VembaTsith, his weapon swinging back in a vicious arc, would have killed the youth promptly if Abnon-Tha had not intervened and bade him stay.

Phariom, standing furious but irresolute before the lifted swords, was aware of the darkly searching eyes of Abnon-Tha, like those of some nyctalopic bird of prey.

"I would know the meaning of this intrusion," said the necromancer. "Truly, you are bold to enter the temple of Mordiggian."

"I came to find the girl who lies yonder," declared Phariom. "She is Elaith, my wife, who was claimed unjustly by the god. But tell me, why have you brought her to this room, from the table of Mordiggian, and what manner of men are you, that raise up the dead as you have raised this other woman?"

"I am Abnon-Tha, the necromancer, and these others are my pupils, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith. Give thanks to Vemba-Tsith, for verily he has brought back your wife from the purlieus of the dead with a skill excelling that of his master. She awoke ere the incantation was finished!"

Phariom glared with implacable suspicion at Abnon-Tha. "Elaith was not dead, but only as one in a trance," he averred. "It was not your pupil's sorcery that awakened her. And verily whether Elaith be dead or living is not a matter that should concern any but myself. Permit us to depart, for I wish to remove with her from Zul-Bha-Sair, in which we are only passing travelers."

So speaking, he turned his back on the necromancers, and went over to Elaith, who regarded him with dazed eyes but uttered his name feebly as he clasped her in his arms.

"Now, this is a remarkable coincidence," purred Abnon-Tha. "I and my pupils are also planning to depart from Zul-Bha-Sair, and we start this very night. Perhaps you will honor us with your company."

"I thank you," said Phariom, curtly. "But I am not sure that our roads lie together. Elaith and I would go toward Tasuun."

"Now, by the black altar of Mordiggian, that is still stranger coincidence, for Tasuun is also our destination We take with us the resurrected girl Arctela, whom I have deemed too fair for the charnel god and his ghouls."

Phariom divined the dark evil that lay behind the oily, mocking speeches of the necromancer. Also, he saw the furtive and sinister sign that Abnon-

Tha had made to his assistants. Weaponless, he could only give a formal assent to the sardonic proposal. He knew well that he would not be permitted to leave the temple alive, for the narrow eyes of Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, regarding him closely, were alight with the red lust of murder.

"Come," said Abnon-Tha, in a voice of imperious command. "It is time to go." He turned to the still figure of Arctela and spoke an unknown word. With vacant eyes and noctambulistic paces, she followed at his heels as he stepped toward the open door. Phariom had helped Elaith to her feet, and was whispering words of reassurance in an effort to lull the growing horror and confused alarm that he saw in her eyes. She was able to walk, albeit slowly and uncertainly. Vemba-Tsith and Narghai drew back, motioning that she and Phariom should precede them; but Phariom, sensing their intent to slay him as soon as his back was turned, obeyed unwillingly and looked desperately about for something that he could seize as a weapon.

One of the metal braziers, full of smoldering coals, was at his very feet. He stooped quickly, lifted it in his hands, and turned upon the necromancers. Vemba-Tsith, as he had suspected, was prowling toward him with upraised, sword, and was making ready to strike. Phariom hurled the brazier and its glowing contents full in the necromancer's face, and Vemba-Tsith went down with a terrible, smothered cry. Narghai, snarling ferociously, leapt foreward to assail the defenseless youth. His scimitar gleamed with a wicked luster in the lurid glare of the urns as he swung it back for the blow. But the weapon did not fall; and Phariom, steeling himself against the impending death, became aware that Narghai was staring beyond him as if petrified by the vision of some Gorgonian specter.

As if compelled by another will than his own, the youth turned and saw the thing that had halted Narghai's blow. Arctela and Abnon-Tha, pausing before the open door, were outlined against a colossal shadow that was not wrought by anything in the room. It filled the portals from side to side, it towered above the lintel—and then, swiftly, it became more than a shadow: it was a bulk of darkness, black and opaque, that somehow blinded the eyes with a strange dazzlement. It seemed to suck the flame from the red urns and fill the chamber with a chill of utter death and voidness. Its form was that of a worm-shapen column, huge as a dragon, its further coils still issuing from the gloom of the corridor; but it changed from moment to moment, swirling and spinning as if alive with the vortical energies of dark

eons. Briefly it took the semblance of some demoniac giant with eyeless head and limbless body; and then, leaping and spreading like smoky fire, it swept forward into the chamber.

Abnon-Tha fell back before it, with frantic mumblings of malediction or exorcism; but Arctela, pale and slight and motionless, remained full in its path, while the thing enfolded her and enveloped her with a hungry flaring until she was hidden wholly from view.

Phariom, supporting Elaith, who leaned weakly on his shoulder as if about to swoon, was powerless to move. He forgot the murderous Narghai, and it seemed that he and Elaith were but faint shadows in the presence of embodied death and dissolution. He saw the blackness grow and wax with the towering of fed flame as it closed about Arctela; and he saw it gleam with eddying hues of somber iris, like the spectrum of a sable sun. For an instant, he heard a soft and flame-like murmuring. Then, quickly and terribly, the thing ebbed from the room. Arctela was gone, as if she had dissolved like a phantom on the air. Borne on a sudden gust of strangely mingled heat and cold, there came an acrid odor, such as would rise from a burnt-out funeral pyre.

“Mordiggian!” shrilled Narghai, in hysteric terror. “It was the god Mordiggian! He has taken Arctela!”

It seemed that his cry was answered by a score of sardonic echoes, unhuman as the howling of hyenas, and yet articulate, that repeated the name Mordiggian. Into the room, from the dark hall, there poured a horde of creatures whose violet robes alone identified them in Phariom’s eyes as the priests of the ghoul-god. They had removed the skull-like masks, revealing heads and faces that were half anthropomorphic, half canine, and wholly diabolic. Also, they had taken off the fingerless gloves… There were at least a dozen of them. Their curving talons gleamed in the bloody light like the hooks of darkly tarnished metal; their spiky teeth, longer than coffin nails, protruded from snarling lips. They closed like a ring of jackals on Abnon-Tha and Narghai, driving them back into the farthest corner. Several others, entering tardily, fell with a bestial ferocity on Vemba-Tsith, who had begun to revive, and was moaning and writhing on the floor amid the scattered coals of the brazier.

They seemed to ignore Phariom and Elaith, who stood looking on as if in some baleful trance. But the hindmost, ere he joined the assailants of

Vemba-Tsith, turned to the youthful pair and addressed them in a hoarse, hollow voice, like a tomb-reverberate barking:

"Go, for Mordiggian is a just god, who claims only the dead, and has no concern with the living. And we, the priests of Mordiggian, deal in our own fashion with those who would violate his law by removing the dead from the temple."

Phariom, with Elaith still leaning on his shoulder, went out into the dark hall, hearing a hideous clamor in which the screams of men were mingled with a growling as of jackals, a laughter as of hyenas. The clamor ceased as, they entered the blue-lit sanctuary and passed toward the outer corridor, and the silence that filled Mordiggian's fane behind them was deep as the silence of the dead on the black altar-table.

THE COLOSSUS OF YLOURGNE

***Weird Tales*, June 1934.**

The thrice-infamous Nathaire, alchemist, astrologer and necromancer, with his ten devil-given pupils, had departed very suddenly and under circumstances of strict secrecy from the town of Vyones. It was widely thought, among the people of that vicinage, that his departure had been prompted by a salutary fear of ecclesiastical thumbscrews and faggots. Other wizards, less notorious than he, had already gone to the stake during a year of unusual inquisitory zeal; and it was well-known that Nathaire had incurred the reprobation of the Church. Few, therefore, considered the reason of his going a mystery; but the means of transit which he had employed, as well as the destination of the sorcerer and his pupils, were regarded as more than problematic.

A thousand dark and superstitious rumours were abroad; and passers made the sign of the Cross when they neared the tall, gloomy house which Nathaire had built in blasphemous proximity to the great cathedral and had filled with a furniture of Satanic luxury and strangeness. Two daring thieves, who had entered the mansion when the fact of its desertion became well established, reported that much of this furniture, as well as the books and other paraphernalia of Nathaire, had seemingly departed with its owner, doubtless to the same fiery bourn. This served to augment the unholy mystery: for it was patently impossible that Nathaire and his ten apprentices, with several cart-loads of household belongings, could have passed the ever-guarded city gates in any legitimate manner without the knowledge of the custodians.

It was said by the more devout and religious moiety that the Archfiend, with a legion of bat-winged assistants, had borne them away bodily at moonless midnight. There were clerics, and also reputable burghers, who professed to have seen the flight of man-like shapes upon the blotted stars together with others that were not men, and to have heard the wailing cries of the hell-bound crew as they passed in an evil cloud over the roofs and city walls.

Others believed that the sorcerers had transported themselves from Vyones through their own diabolic arts, and had withdrawn to some unfrequented fastness where Nathaire, who had long been in feeble health, could hope to die in such peace and serenity as might be enjoyed by one who stood between the flames of the auto-da-fé and those of Abaddon. It was thought that he had lately cast his own horoscope, for the first time in his fifty-odd years, and had read therein an impending conjunction of disastrous planets, signifying early death.

Others still, among whom were certain rival astrologers and enchanters, said that Nathaire had retired from the public view merely that he might commune without interruption with various coadjutive demons; and thus might weave, unmolested, the black spells of a supreme and lycanthropic malice. These spells, they hinted, would in due time be visited upon Vyones and perhaps upon the entire region of Averoigne; and would no doubt take the form of a fearsome pestilence, or a wholesale invultuation, or a realm-wide incursion of succubi and incubi.

Amid the seething of strange rumours, many half-forgotten tales were recalled, and new legends were created overnight Much was made of the obscure nativity of Nathaire and his dubitable wanderings before he had settled, six years previous, in Vyones. People said that he was fiend-begotten, like the fabled Merlin: his father being no less a personage than Alastor, demon of revenge; and his mother a deformed and dwarfish sorceress. From the former, he had taken his spitefulness and malignity; from the latter, his squat, puny physique.

He had travelled in Orient lands, and had learned from Egyptian or Saracenic masters the unhallowed art of necromancy, in whose practice he was unrivalled. There were black whispers anent the use he had made of long-dead bodies, of fleshless bones, and the service he had wrung from buried men that the angel of doom alone could lawfully raise up. He had never been popular, though many had sought his advice and assistance in the furthering of their own more or less dubious affairs. Once, in the third year after his coming to Vyones, he had been stoned in public because of his bruited necromancies, and had been permanently lamed by a well-directed cobble. This injury, it was thought, he had never forgiven; and he was said to return the antagonism of the clergy with the hellish hatred of an Antichrist.

Apart from the sorcerous evils and abuses of which he was commonly suspected, he had long been looked upon as a corrupter of youth. Despite his minikin stature, his deformity and ugliness, he possessed a remarkable power, a mesmeric persuasion; and his pupils, whom he was said to have plunged into bottomless and ghoulish iniquities, were young men of the most brilliant promise. On the whole, his vanishment was regarded as a quite providential riddance.

Among the people of the city there was one man who took no part in the sombre gossip and lurid speculation. This man was Gaspard du Nord, himself a student of the proscribed sciences, who had been numbered for a year among the pupils of Nathaire but had chosen to withdraw quietly from the master's household after learning the enormities that would attend his further initiation. He had, however, taken with him much rare and peculiar knowledge, together with a certain insight into the baleful powers and night-dark motives of the necromancer.

Because of this knowledge and insight, Gaspard preferred to remain silent when he heard of Nathaire's departure. Also, he did not think it well to revive the memory of his own past pupilage. Alone with his books, in a sparsely furnished attic, he frowned above a small, oblong mirror, framed with an arabesque of golden vipers, that had once been the property of Nathaire.

It was not the reflection of his own comely and youthful though subtly lined face that caused him to frown. Indeed, the mirror was of another kind than that which reflects the features of the gazer. In its depths, for a few instants, he had beheld a strange and ominous-looking scene, whose participants were known to him but whose location he could not recognize or orientate. Before he could study it closely, the mirror had clouded as if with the rising of alchemic fumes, and he had seen no more.

This clouding, he reflected, could mean only one thing: Nathaire had known himself watched and had put forth a counterspell that rendered the clairvoyant mirror useless. It was the realization of this fact, together with the brief, sinister glimpse of Nathaire's present activities, that troubled Gaspard and caused a chill horror to mount slowly in his mind: a horror that had not yet found a palpable form or a name.

2. The Gathering of the Dead

The departure of Nathaire and his pupils occurred in the late spring of 1281, during the interlunar dark. Afterwards a new moon waxed above the flowery fields and bright-leafed woods and waned in ghostly silver. With its waning, people began to talk of other magicians and fresher mysteries.

Then, in the moon-deserted nights of early summer, there came a series of disappearances far more unnatural and inexplicable than that of the dwarfish, malignant sorcerer.

It was found one day, by grave-diggers who had gone early to their toil in a cemetery outside the walls of Vyones, that no less than six newly occupied graves had been opened, and the bodies, which were those of reputable citizens, removed. On closer examination, it became all too evident that this removal had not been effected by robbers. The coffins, which lay aslant or stood protruding upright from the mould, offered all the appearance of having been shattered from within as if by the use of extrahuman strength; and the fresh earth itself was upheaved, as if the dead men, in some awful, untimely resurrection, had actually dug their way to the surface.

The corpses had vanished utterly, as if hell had swallowed them; and, as far as could be learned, there were no eyewitnesses of their fate. In those devil-ridden times, only one explanation of the happening seemed credible: demons had entered the graves and had taken bodily possession of the dead, compelling them to arise and go forth.

To the dismay and horror of all Averoigne, the strange vanishment was foIlowed with appalling promptness by many others of a like sort. It seemed as if an occult, resistless summons had been laid upon the dead. Nightly, for a period of two weeks, the cemeteries of Vyones and also those of other towns, of villages and hamlets, gave up a ghastly quota of their tenants. From brazen bolted tombs, from common charnels, from shallow, unconsecrated trenches, from the marble lidded vaults of churches and cathedrals, the weird exodus went on without cessation.

Worse than this, if possible, there were newly ceremented corpses that leapt from their biers or catafalques, and disregarding the horrified watchers, ran with great bounds of automatic frenzy into the night, never to be seen again by those who lamented them.

In every case, the missing bodies were those of young stalwart men who had died but recently and had met their death through violence or accident

rather than wasting illness. Some were criminals who had paid the penalty of their misdeeds; others were men-at-arms or constables, slain in the execution of their duty. Knights who had died in tourney or personal combat were numbered among them; and many were the victims of the robber bands who infested Averoigne at that time. There were monks, merchants, nobles, yeomen, pages, priests; but none, in any case, who had passed the prime of life. The old and infirm, it seemed, were safe from the animating demons.

The situation was looked upon by the more superstitious as a veritable omening of the world's end. Satan was making war with his cohorts and was carrying the bodies of the holy dead into hellish captivity. The consternation increased a hundredfold when it became plain that even the most liberal sprinkling of holy water, the performance of the most awful and cogent exorcisms, failed utterly to give protection against this diabolic ravishment. The Church owned itself powerless to cope with the strange evil; and the forces of secular law could do nothing to arraign or punish the intangible agency.

Because of the universal fear that prevailed, no effort was made to follow the missing cadavers. Ghastly tales, however, were told by late wayfarers who had met certain of these liches, striding alone or in companies along the roads of Averoigne. They gave the appearance of being deaf, dumb, totally insensate, and of hurrying with horrible speed and sureness towards a remote, predestined goal. The general direction of their flight, it seemed, was eastward; but only with the cessation of the exodus, which had numbered several hundred people, did any one begin to suspect the actual destination of the dead.

This destination, it somehow became rumoured, was the ruinous castle of Ylourgne, beyond the werewolf-haunted forest, in the outlying, semi-mountainous hills of Averoigne.

Ylourgne, a great, craggy pile that had been built by a line of evil and marauding barons now extinct, was a place that even the goatherds preferred to shun. The wrathful spectres of its bloody lords were said to move turbulently in its crumbling halls; and its chatelaines were the Undead. No one cared to dwell in the shadow of its cliff-founded walls; and the nearest abode of living men was a small Cistercian monastery, more than a mile away on the opposite slope of the valley.

The monks of this austere brotherhood held little commerce with the world beyond the hills; and few were the visitors who sought admission at their high-perched portals. But, during that dreadful summer, following the disappearances of the dead, a weird and disquieting tale went forth from the monastery throughout Averoigne.

Beginning with late spring, the Cistercian monks were compelled to take cognizance of sundry odd phenomena in the old, long-deserted ruins of Ylourgne, which were visible from their windows. They had beheld flaring lights, where lights should not have been: flames of uncanny blue and crimson that shuddered behind the broken, weed-grown embrasures or rose starwards above the jagged crenelations. Hideous noises had issued from the ruin by night together with the flames; and the monks had heard a clangour as of hellish anvils and hammers, a ringing of gigantic armour and maces, and had deemed that Ylourgne was become a mustering-ground of devils. Mephitic odours as of brimstone and burning flesh had floated across the valley; and even by day, when the noises were silent and the lights no longer flared, a thin haze of hell-blue vapour hung upon the battlements. It was plain, the monks thought, that the place had been occupied from beneath by subterrestrial beings; for no one was seen to approach it by way of the bare, open slopes and crags. Observing these signs of the Archfoe's activity in their neighbourhood, they crossed themselves with new fervour and frequency, and said their Paters and Aves more interminably than before. Their toil and austerities, also, they redoubled. Otherwise, since the old castle was a place abandoned by men, they took no heed of the supposed occupation, deeming it well to mind their own affairs unless in case of overt Satanic hostility.

They kept a careful watch; but for several weeks they saw no one who actually entered Ylourgne or emerged therefrom. Except for the nocturnal lights and noises, and the hovering vapour by day, there was no proof of tenantry either human or diabolic. Then, one morning, in the valley below the terraced gardens of the monastery, two brothers, hoeing weeds in a carrot-patch, beheld the passing of a singular train of people who came from the direction of the great forest of Averoigne and went upwards climbing the steep, chasmy slope towards Ylourgne.

These people, the monks averred, were striding along in great haste, with stiff but flying steps; and all were strangely pale of feature and were habited

in the garments of the grave. The shrouds of some were torn and ragged; and all were dusty with travel or grimed with the mould of interment. The people numbered a dozen or more; and after them, at intervals, there came several stragglers, attired like the rest. With marvellous agility and speed, they mounted the hill and disappeared at length amid the lowering walls of Ylourgne.

At this time, no rumour of the ravished graves and biers had reached the Cistercians. The tale was brought to them later, after they had beheld, on many successive mornings, the passing of small or great companies of the dead towards the devil-taken castle. Hundreds of these liches, they swore, had filed by beneath the monastery; and doubtless many others had gone past unnoted in the dark. None, however, were seen to come forth from Ylourgne, which had swallowed them up like the undisgorging Pit.

Though direly frightened and sorely scandalized, the brothers still thought it well to refrain from action. Some, the hardiest, irked by all these flagrant signs of evil, had desired to visit the ruins with holy water and lifted crucifixes. But their abbot, in his wisdom, enjoined them to wait. In the meanwhile, the nocturnal flames grew brighter, the noises louder.

Also, in the course of this waiting, while incessant prayers went up from the little monastery, a frightful thing occurred. One of the brothers, a stout fellow named Theophile, in violation of the rigorous discipline, had made over-frequent visits to the wine-casks. No doubt he had tried to drown his pious horror at these untoward happenings, At any rate, after his potations, he had the ill-luck to wander out among the precipices and break his neck.

Sorrowing for his death and dereliction, the brothers laid Theophile in the chapel and chanted their masses for his soul. These masses, in the dark hours before morning, were interrupted by the untimely resurrection of the dead monk, who, with his head lolling horribly on his broken neck, rushed as if fiend-ridden from the chapel and ran down the hill towards the demon flames and clamours of Ylourgne.

3. The Testimony of the Monks

Following the above-related occurrence, two of the brothers who had previously desired to visit the haunted castle again applied to the abbot for this permission, saying that God would surely aid them in avenging the

abduction of Theophile's body as well as the taking of many others from consecrated ground. Marvelling at the hardihood of these lusty monks, who preposed to beard the Arch-enemy in his lair, the abbot permitted them to go forth, furnished with aspergilluses and flasks of holy water, and bearing great crosses of hornbeam, such as would have served for maces with which to brain an armoured knight.

The monks, whose names were Bernard and Stephane, went boldly up at middle forenoon to assail the evil stronghold. It was an arduous climb, among overhanging boulders and along slippery scarps; but both were stout and agile, and, moreover, well accustomed to such climbing. Since the day was sultry and airless, their white robes were soon stained with sweat; but pausing only for brief prayer, they pressed on; and in good season they neared the castle, upon whose grey, time-eroded ramparts they could still descry no evidence of occupation or activity.

The deep moat that had once surrounded the place was now dry, and had been partly filled by crumbling earth and detritus from the walls. The drawbridge had rotted away; but the blocks of the barbican, collapsing into the moat, had made a sort of rough causey on which it was possible to cross. Not without trepidation, and lifting their crucifixes as warriors lift their weapons in the escalade of an armed fortress, the brothers climbed over the ruin of the barbican into the courtyard.

This too, like the battlements, was seemingly deserted. Overgrown nettles, rank grasses and sapling trees were rooted between its paving-stones. The high, massive donjon, the chapel, and that portion of the castellated structure containing the great hall, had preserved their main outlines after centuries of dilapidation. To the left of the broad bailey, a doorway yawned like the mouth of a dark cavern in the cliffy mass of the hall-building; and from this doorway there issued a thin, bluish vapour, writhing in phantom coils towards the unclouded heavens.

Approaching the doorway, the brothers beheld a gleaming of red fires within, like the eyes of dragons blinking through infernal murk. They felt sure that the place was an outpost of Erebus, an ante-chamber of the Pit; but nevertheless, they entered bravely, chanting loud exorcisms and brandishing their mighty crosses of hornbeam.

Passing through the cavernous doorway, they could see but indistinctly in the gloom, being somewhat blinded by the summer sunlight they had left.

Then, with the gradual clearing of their vision, a monstrous scene was limned before them, with evergrowing details of crowding horror and grotesquery. Some of the details were obscure and mysteriously terrifying; others, all too plain, were branded as if with sudden, ineffaceable hell-fire on the minds of the monks.

They stood on the threshold of a colossal chamber, which seemed to have been made by the tearing down of upper floors and inner partitions adjacent to the castle hall, itself a room of huge extent. The chamber seemed to recede through interminable shadow, shafted with sunlight falling through the rents of ruin: sunlight that was powerless to dissipate the infernal gloom and mystery.

The monks averred later that they saw many people moving about the place, together with sundry demons, some of whom were shadowy and gigantic, and others barely to be distinguished from the men. These people, as well as their familiars, were occupied with the tending of reverberatory furnaces and immense pear-shaped and gourd-shaped vessels such as were used in alchemy. Some, also, were stooping above great fuming cauldrons, like sorcerers, busy with the brewing of terrible drugs. Against the opposite wall, there were two enormous vats, built of stone and mortar, whose circular sides rose higher than a man’s head, so that Bernard and Stephane were unable to determine their contents. One of the vats gave forth a whitish glimmering; the other, a ruddy luminosity.

Near the vats, and somewhat between them, there stood a sort of low couch or litter, made of luxurious, weirdly figured fabrics such as the Saracens weave. On this the monks discerned a dwarfish being, pale and wizened, with eyes of chill flame that shone like evil beryls through the dusk. The dwarf, who had all the air of a feeble moribund, was supervising the toils of the men and their familiars.

The dazed eyes of the brothers began to comprehend other details. They saw that several corpses, among which they recognized that of Theophile, were lying on the middle floor, together with a heap of human bones that had been wrenched asunder at the joints, and great lumps of flesh piled like the carvings of butchers. One of the men was lifting the bones and dropping them into a cauldron beneath which there glowed a rubycoloured fire; and another was flinging the lumps of flesh into a tub filled with some hueless liquid that gave forth an evil hissing as of a thousand serpents.

Others had stripped the grave-clothes from one of the cadavers, and were starting to assail it with long knives. Others still were mounting rude flights of stone stairs along the walls of the immense vats, carrying vessels filled with semi-liquescent matters which they emptied over the high rims.

Appalled at this vision of human and Satanic turpitude, and feeling a more than righteous indignation, the monks resumed their chanting of sonorous exorcisms and rushed forward. Their entrance, it appeared, was not perceived by the heinously occupied crew of sorcerers and devils.

Bernard and Stephane, filled with an ardour of godly wrath, were about to fling themselves upon the butchers who had started to assail the dead body. This corpse they recognized as being that of a notorious outlaw, named Jacques Le Loupgarou, who had been slain a few days previous in combat with the officers of the state. Le Loupgarou, noted for his brawn, his cunning and his ferocity, had long terrorized the woods and highways of Averoigne. His great body had been half eviscerated by the swords of the constabulary; and his beard was stiff and purple with the dried blood of a ghastly wound that had cloven his face from temple to mouth. He had died unshriven, but nevertheless, the monks were unwilling to see his helpless cadaver put to some unhallowed use beyond the surmise of Christians.

The pale, malignant-looking dwarf had now perceived the brothers. They heard him cry out in a shrill, imperatory tone that rose above the ominous hiss of the cauldrons and the hoarse mutter of men and demons.

They knew not his words, which were those of some outlandish tongue and sounded like an incantation. Instantly, as if in response to an order, two of the men turned from their unholy chemistry, and lifting copper basins filled with an unknown, fetid liquor, hurled the contents of these vessels in the faces of Bernard and Stephane.

The brothers were blinded by the stinging fluid, which bit their flesh as with many serpents' teeth; and they were overcome by the noxious fumes, so that their great crosses dropped from their hands and they both fell unconscious on the castle floor.

Recovering anon their sight and their other senses, they found that their hands had been tied with heavy thongs of gut, so that they were now helpless and could no longer wield their crucifixes or the sprinklers of holy water which they carried.

In this ignominious condition, they heard the voice of the evil dwarf, commanding them to arise. They obeyed, though clumsily and with difficulty, being denied the assistance of their hands. Bernard, who was still sick with the poisonous vapour he had inhaled, fell twice before he succeeded in standing erect; and his discomfiture was greeted with a cachinnation of foul, obscene laughter from the assembled sorcerers.

Now, standing, the monks were taunted by the dwarf, who mocked and reviled them, with appalling blasphemies such as could be uttered only by a bond-servant of Satan. At last, according to their sworn testimony, he said to them:

"Return to your kennel, ye whelps of Ialdabaoth, and take with you this message: They that came here as many shall go forth as one."

Then, in obedience to a dreadful formula spoken by the dwarf, two of the familiars, who had the shape of enormous and shadowy beasts, approached the body of Le Loupgarou and that of Brother Theophile. One of the foul demons, like a vapour that sinks into a marsh, entered the bloody nostrils of Le Loupgarou, disappearing inch by inch, till its horned and bestial head was withdrawn from sight. The other, in like manner, went in through the nostrils of Brother Theophile, whose head lay weird athwart his shoulder on the broken neck.

Then, when the demons had completed their possession, the bodies, in a fashion horrible to behold, were raised up from the castle floor, the one with ravelled entrails hanging from its wide wounds, the other with a head that dropped forward loosely on its bosom. Then, animated by their devils, the cadavers took up the crosses of hornbeam that had been dropped by Stephane and Bernard; and using the crosses for bludgeons, they drove the monks in ignominious flight from the castle, amid a loud, tempestuous howling of infernal laughter from the dwarf and his necromantic crew. And the nude corpse of Le Loupgarou and the robed cadaver of Theophile followed them far on the chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne, striking great blows with the crosses, so that the backs of the two Cistercians were become a mass of bloody bruises.

After a defeat so signal and crushing, no more of the monks were emboldened to go up against Ylourgne. The whole monastery, thereafter, devoted itself to triple austerities, to quadrupled prayers; and awaiting the

unknown will of God, and the equally obscure machinations of the Devil, maintained a pious faith that was somewhat tempered with trepidation.

In time, through goatherds who visited the monks, the tale of Stephane and Bernard went forth throughout Averoigne, adding to the grievous alarm that had been caused by the wholesale disappearance of the dead. No one knew what was really going on in the haunted castle or what disposition had been made of the hundreds of migratory corpses; for the light thrown on their fate by the monks' story, though lurid and frightful, was all too inconclusive; and the message sent by the dwarf was somewhat cabalistic.

Everyone felt, however, that some gigantic menace, some black, infernal enchantment, was being brewed within the ruinous walls. The malign, moribund dwarf was all too readily identified with the missing sorcerer, Nathaire; and his underlings, it was plain, were Nathaire's pupils.

4. The Going-Forth of Gaspard du Nord

Alone in his attic chamber, Gaspard du Nord, student of alchemy and sorcery and quondam pupil of Nathaire, sought repeatedly, but always in vain, to consult the viper-circled mirror. The glass remained obscure and cloudy, as with the risen fumes of Satanical alembics or baleful necromantic braziers. Haggard and weary with long nights of watching, Gaspard knew that Nathaire was even more vigilant than he.

Reading with anxious care the general configuration of the stars, he found the foretokening of a great evil that was to come upon Averoigne. But the nature of the evil was not clearly shown.

In the meanwhile the hideous resurrection and migration of the dead was taking place. All Averoigne shuddered at the manifold enormity. Like the timeless night of a Memphian plague, terror settled everywhere; and people spoke of each new atrocity in bated whispers, without daring to voice the execrable tale aloud. To Gaspard, as to everyone, the whispers came; and likewise, after the horror had apparently ceased in early midsummer, there came the appalling story of the Cistercian monks.

Now, at last, the long-baffled watcher found an inkling of that which he sought. The hiding-place of the fugitive necromancer and his apprentices, at least, had been uncovered; and the disappearing dead were clearly traced to their bourn. But still, even for the percipient Gaspard, there remained an

undeclared enigma: the exact nature of the abominable brew, the hell-dark sorcery, that Nathaire was concocting in his remote den. Gaspard felt sure of one thing only: the dying, splenetic dwarf, knowing that his allotted time was short, and hating the people of Averoigne with a bottomless rancour, would prepare an enormous and maleficent magic without parallel.

Even with his knowledge of Nathaire's proclivities, and his awareness of the well-nigh inexhaustible arcanic science, the reserves of pit-deep wizardry possessed by the dwarf, he could form only vague, terrifical conjectures anent the incubated evil. But, as time went on, he felt an ever-deepening oppression, the adumbration of a monstrous menace crawling from the dark rim of the world. He could not shake off his disquietude; and finally he resolved despite the obvious perils of such an excursion, to pay a secret visit to the neightborhood of Ylourgne.

Gaspard, though he came of a well-to-do family, was at that time in straitened circumstances; for his devotion to a somewhat doubtful science had been disapproved by his father. His sole income was a small pittance, purveyed secretly to the youth by his mother and sister. This sufficed for his meagre food, the rent of his room, and a few books and instruments and chemicals; but it would not permit the purchase of a horse or even a humble mule for the proposed journey of more than forty miles.

Undaunted, he set forth on foot, carrying only a dagger and a wallet of food. He timed his wanderings so that he would reach Ylourgne at nightfall in the rising of a full moon. Much of his journey lay through the great, lowering forest, which approached the very walls of Vyones on the eastern side and ran in a sombre arc through Averoigne to the mouth of the rocky valley below Ylourgne. After a few miles, he emerged from the mighty wood of pines and oaks and larches; and thenceforward, for the first day, followed the river Isoile thiough an open, well-peopled plain. He spent the warm summer night beneath a beech-tree, in the vicinity of a small village, not caring to sleep in the lonely woods where robbers and wolves—and creatures of a more baleful repute—were commonly supposed to dwell.

At evening of the second day, after passing through the wildest and oldest portion of the immemorial wood, he came to the steep, stony valley that led to his destination. This valley was the fountain-head of the Isoile, which had dwindled to a mere rivulet. In the brown twilight, between sunset and moonrise, he saw the lights of the Cistercian monastery; and opposite,

on the piled, forbidding scarps, the grim and rugged mass of the ruinous stronghold of Ylourgne, with wan and wizard fires flickering behind its high embrasures. Apart from these fires, there was no sign of occupation; and he did not hear at any time the dismal noises reported by the monks.

Gaspard waited till the round moon, yellow as the eye of some immense nocturnal bird, had begun to peer above the darkling valley. Then, very cautiously, since the neighbourhood was strange to him, he started to make his way towards the sombre, brooding castle.

Even for one well-used to such climbing, the escalade would have offered enough difficulty and danger by moonlight. Several times, finding himself at the bottom of a sheer cliff, he was compelled to retrace his hard-won progress; and often he was saved from falling only by stunted shrubs and briars that had taken root in the niggard soil. Breathless, with torn raiment and scored and bleeding hands, he gained at length the shoulder of the craggy height, below the walls.

Here he paused to recover breath and recuperate his flagging strength. He could see from his vantage the pale reflection as of hidden flames, that beat upwards on the inner walls of the high-built donjon. He heard a low hum of confused noises, whose distance and direction were alike baffling. Sometimes they seemed to float downwards from the black battlements, sometimes to issue from subterranean depths far in the hill.

Apart from this remote, ambiguous hum, the night was locked in a mortal stillness. The very winds appeared to shun the vicinity of the dread castle. An unseen, clammy cloud of paralyzing evil hung removeless upon all things; and the pale, swollen moon, the patroness of witches and sorcerers, distilled her green poison above the crumbling towers in a silence older than time.

Gaspard felt the obscenely clinging weight of a more burdenous thing than his own fatigue when he resumed his progress towards the barbican. Invisible webs of the waiting, ever-gathering evil seemed to impede him. The slow, noisome flapping of intangible wings was heavy in his face. He seemed to breathe a surging wind from unfathomable vaults and caverns of corruption. Inaudible howlings, derisive or minatory, thronged in his ears, and foul hands appeared to thrust him back. But, bowing his head as if against a blowing gale, he went on and climbed the mounded ruin of the barbican, into the weedy courtyard.

The place was deserted, to all seeming; and much of it was still deep in the shadows of the walls and turrets. Near by, in the black, silver-crenellated pile, Gaspard saw the open, cavernous doorway described by the monks. It was lit from within by a lurid glare, wannish and eerie as marsh-fires. The humming noise, now audible as a muttering of voices, issued from the doorway; and Gaspard thought that he could see dark, sooty figures moving rapidly in the lit interior.

Keeping in the farther shadows, he stole along the courtyard, making a sort of circuit amid the ruins. He did not dare to approach the open entrance for fear of being seen; though, as far as he could tell, the place was unguarded.

He came to the donjon, on whose upper wall the wan light flickered obliquely through a sort of rift in the long building adjacent. This opening was at some distance from the ground; and Gaspard saw that it had been formerly the door to a stony balcony. A flight of broken steps led upwards along the wall to the half-crumbled remnant of this balcony; and it occurred to the youth that he might climb the steps and peer unobserved into the interior of Ylourgne.

Some of the stairs were missing; and all were in heavy shadow. Gaspard found his way precariously to the balcony, pausing once in considerable alarm when a fragment of the worn stone, loosened by his footfall, dropped with a loud clattering on the courtyard flags below. Apparently it was unheard by the occupants of the castle; and after a little he resumed his climbing.

Cautiously he neared the large, ragged opening through which the light poured upwards. Crouching on a narrow ledge, which was all that remained of the balcony, he peered in on a most astounding and terrific spectacle, whose details were so bewildering that he could barely comprehend their import till after many minutes.

It was plain that the story told by the monks—allowing for their religious bias—had been far from extravagant. Almost the whole interior of the half-ruined pile had been torn down and dismantled to afford room for the activities of Nathaire. This demolition in itself was a superhuman task for whose execution the sorcerer must have employed a legion of familiars as well as his ten pupils.

The vast chamber was fitfully illumed by the glare of athanors and braziers; and, above all, by the weird glimmering from the huge stone vats. Even from his high vantage, the watcher could not see the contents of these vats; but a white luminosity poured, upwards from the rim of one of them, and a flesh-tinted phosphorescence from the other.

Gaspard had seen certain of the experiments and evocations of Nathaire, and was all too familiar with the appurtenances of the dark arts. Within certain limits, he was not squeamish; nor was it likely that he would have been terrified overmuch by the shadowy, uncouth shapes of demons who toiled in the pit below him side by side with the blackclad pupils of the sorcerer. But a cold horror clutched his heart when he saw the incredible, enormous thing that occupied the central floor: the colossal human skeleton a hundred feet in length, stretching for more than the extent of the old castle hall; the skeleton whose bony right foot the group of men and devils, to all appearance, were busily clothing with human flesh!

The prodigious and macabre framework, complete in every part, with ribs like arches of some Satanic nave, shone as if it were still heated by the fires of an infernal welding. It seemed to shimmer and burn with unnatural life, to quiver with malign disquietude in the flickering glare and gloom. The great fingerbones, curving claw-like on the floor, appeared as if they were about to close upon some helpless prey. The tremendous teeth were set in an everlasting grin of sardonic cruelty and malice. The hollow eye-sockets, deep as Tartarean wells, appeared to seethe with myriad, mocking lights, like the eyes of elementals swimming upwards in obscene shadow.

Gaspard was stunned by the shocking and stupendous fantasmagoria that yawned before him like a peopled hell. Afterwards he was never wholly sure of certain things, and could remember very little of the actual manner in which the work of the men and their assistants was being carried on. Dim, dubious, bat-like creatures seemed to be flitting to and fro between one of the stone vats and the group that toiled like sculptors, clothing the bony foot with a reddish plasm which they applied and moulded like so much clay. Gaspard thought, but was not certain later, that this plasm, which gleamed as if with mingled blood and fire, was being brought from the rosy-litten vat in vessels borne by the claws of the shadowy flying creatures. None of them, however, approached the other vat, whose wannish light was momently enfeebled, as if it were dying down.

He looked for the minikin figure of Nathaire, whom he could not distinguish in the crowded scene. The sick necromancer—if he had not already succumbed to the little-known disease that had long wasted him like an inward flame—was no doubt hidden from view by the colossal skeleton and was perhaps directing the labours of the men and demons from his couch.

Spellbound on that precarious ledge, the watcher failed to hear the furtive, cat-like feet that were climbing behind him on the ruinous stairs. Too late, he heard the clink of a loose fragment close upon his heels; and turning in startlement, he toppled into sheer oblivion beneath the impact of a cudgel-like blow, and did not even know that the beginning fall of his body towards the courtyard had been arrested by his assailant's arms.

5. The Horror of Ylourgne

Gaspard, returning from his dark plunge into Lethean emptiness, found himself gazing into the eyes of Nathaire: those eyes of liquid night and ebony, in which swam the chill, malignant fires of stars that had gone down to irremeable perdition. For some time, in the confusion of his senses, he could see nothing but the eyes, which seemed to have drawn him forth like baleful magnets from his swoon. Apparently disembodied, or set in a face too vast for human cognizance, they burned before him in chaotic murk; Then, by degrees, he saw the other features of the sorcerer, and the details of a lurid scene; and became aware of his own situation.

Trying to lift his hands to his aching head, he found that they were bound tightly together at the wrists. He was half lying, half leaning against an object with hard planes and edges that irked his back. This object he discovered to be a sort of alchemic furnace, or athanor, part of a litter of disused apparatus that stood or lay on the castle floor. Cupels, aludels, cucurbits, like enormous gourds and globes, were mingled in strange confusion with the piled, iron-clasped books and the sooty cauldrons and braziers of a darker science.

Nathaire, propped among Saracenic cushions with arabesques of sullen gold and fulgurant scarlet, was peering upon him from a kind of improvised-couch, made with bales of Orient rugs and arrases, to whose luxury the rude walls of the castle, stained with mould and mottled with

dead fungi, offered a grotesque foil. Dim lights and evilly swooping shadows flickered across the scene; and Gaspard could hear a guttural hum of voices behind him. Twisting his head a little, he saw one of the stone vats, whose rosy luminosity was blurred and blotted by vampire wings that went to and fro.

"Welcome," said Nathaire, after an interval in which the student began to perceive the fatal progress of illness in the painpinched features before him. "So Gaspard du Nord has come to see his former master!" The harsh, imperatory voice, with demoniac volume, issued appallingly from the wizened frame.

"I have come," said Gaspard, in laconic echo. "Tell me, what devil's work is this in which I find you engaged? And what have you done with the dead bodies that were stolen by your accursed familiars?"

The frail, dying body of Nathaire, as if possessed by some sardonic fiend, rocked to and fro on the luxurious couch in a long, violent gust of laughter, without other reply.

"If your looks bear creditable witness," said Gaspard, when the baleful laughter had ceased, "you are mortally ill, and the time is short in which you can hope to atone for your deeds of malice and make your peace with God—if indeed it still be possible for you to make peace. What foul and monstrous brew are you preparing, to ensure the ultimate perdition of your soul?"

The dwarf was again seized by a spasm of diabolic mirth.

"Nay, nay, my good Gaspard," he said finally. "I have made another bond than the one with which puling cowards try to purchase the good will and forgiveness of the heavenly Tyrant. Hell may take me in the end, if it will; but Hell has paid, and will still pay, an ample and goodly price. I must die soon, it is true, for my doom is written in the stars: but in death, by the grace of Satan, I live again, and shall go forth endowed with the mighty thews of the Anakim, to visit vengeance on the people of Averoigne, who have long hated me for my necromantic wisdom and have held me in derision for my dwarf stature."

"What madness is this whereof you dream?" asked the youth, appalled by the more than human frenzy and malignity that seemed to dilate the shrunken frame of Nathaire and stream in Tartarean lustre from his eyes.

“It is no madness, but a veritable thing: a miracle, mayhap, as life itself is a miracle.… From the fresh bodies of the dead, which otherwise would have rotted away in charnel foulness, my pupils and familiars are making for me, beneath my instruction, the giant form whose skeleton you have beheld. My soul, at the death of its present body, will pass into this colossal tenement through the working of certain spells of transmigration in which my faithful assistants have also been carefully instructed.”

“If you had remained with me, Gaspard, and had not drawn back in your petty, pious squeamishness from the marvels and profundities that I should have unveiled for you, it would now be your privilege to share in the creation of this prodigy.… And if you had come to Ylourgne a little sooner in your presumptuous prying, I might have made a certain use of your stout bones and muscles…the same use I have made of other young men, who died through accident or violence. But it is too late even for this, since the building of the bones has been completed, and it remains only to invest them with human flesh. My good Gaspard, there is nothing whatever to be done with you—except to put you safely out of the way. Providentially, for this purpose, there is an oubliette beneath the castle: a somewhat dismal lodging-place, no doubt, but one that was made strong and deep by the grim lords of Ylourgne.”

Gaspard was unable to frame any reply to this sinister and extraordinary speech. Searching his horror-frozen brain for words, he felt himself seized from behind by the hands of unseen beings who had come, no doubt, in answer to some gesture of Nathaire: a gesture which the captive had not perceived. He was blindfolded with some heavy fabric, mouldy and musty as a gravecloth, and was led stumbling through the litter of strange apparatus, and down a winding flight of ruinous, narrow stairs from which the noisome breath of stagnating water, mingled with the oily muskiness of serpents, arose to meet him.

He appeared to descend for a distance that would admit of no return. Slowly the stench grew stronger, more insupportable; the stairs ended; a door clanged sullenly on rusty hinges; and Gaspard was thrust forward on a damp, uneven floor that seemed to have been worn away by myriad feet.

He heard the grating of a ponderous slab of stone. His wrists were untied, the bandage was removed from his eyes, and he saw by the light of flickering torches a round hole that yawned in the oozing floor at his feet.

Beside it was the lifted slab that had formed its lid. Before he could turn to see the faces of his captors, to learn if they were men or devils, he was seized rudely and thrust into the gaping hole. He fell through Erebus-like darkness, for what seemed an immense distance, before he struck bottom. Lying half stunned in a shallow, fetid pool, he heard the funereal thud of the heavy slab as it slid back into place far above him.

6. The Vaults of Ylourgne

Gaspard was revived, after a while, by the chillness of the water in which he lay. His garments were half soaked; and the slimy mephitic pool, as he discovered by his first movement, was within an inch of his mouth. He could hear a steady, monotonous dripping somewhere in the rayless night of his dungeon. He staggered to his feet, finding that his bones were still intact, and began a cautious exploration, Foul drops fell upon his hair and lifted face as he moved; his feet slipped and splashed in the rotten water; there were angry, vehement hissings, and serpentine coils slithered coldly across his ankles.

He soon came to a rough wall of stone, and following the wall with his finger-tips, he tried to determine the extent of the oubliette. The place was more or less circular, without corners, and he failed to form any just idea of its circuit. Somewhere in his wanderings, he found a shelving pile of rubble that rose above the water against the wall; and here, for the sake of comparative dryness and comfort, he ensconced himself, after dispossessiing a number of outraged reptiles. These creatures, it seemed, were inoffensive, and probably belonged to some species of water-snake; but he shivered at the touch of their clammy scales.

Sitting on the rubble-heap, Gaspard reviewed in his mind the various horrors of a situation that was infinitely dismal and desperate. He had learned the incredible, soul-shaking secret of Ylourgne, the unimaginably monstrous and blasphemous project of Nathaire; but now, immured in this noisome hole as in a subterranean tomb, in depths beneath the devil-haunted pile, he could not even warn the world of imminent menace.

The wallet of food, now more than half empty, with which he had started from Vyones, was still hanging at his back; and he assured himself by investigation that his captors had not troubled to deprive him of his dagger.

Gnawing a crust of stale bread in the darkness, and caressing with his hand the hilt of the precious weapon, he sought for some rift in the all-environing despair.

He had no means of measuring the black hours that went over him with the slowness of a slime-clogged river, crawling in blind silence to a subterrene sea. The ceaseless drip of water, probably from sunken hill-springs that had supplied the castle in former years alone broke the stillness; but the sound became in time an equivocal monotone that suggested to his half-delirious mind the mirthless and perpetual chuckling of unseen imps. At last, from sheer bodily exhaustion, he fell into troubled nightmare-ridden chamber.

He could not tell if it were night or noon in the world without when he awakened; for the same stagnant darkness, unrelieved by ray or glimmer, brimmed the oubliette. Shivering, he became aware of a steady draught that blew upon him: a dank, unwholesome air, like the breath of unsunned vaults that had wakened into cryptic Iife and activity during his sleep. He had not noticed the draught heretofore; and his numb brain was startled into sudden hope by the intimation which it conveyed. Obviously there was some underground rift or channel through which the air entered; and this rift might somehow prove to be a place of egress from the oubliette.

Getting to his feet, he groped uncertainly forward in the direction of the draught. He stumbled over something that cracked and broke beneath his heels, and narrowly checked himself from falling on his face in tbe slimy, serpent-haunted pool. Before he could investigate the obstruction or resume his blind groping, he heard a harsh, grating noise above, and a wavering shaft of yellow light came down through the oubliette's opened mouth. Dazzled, he looked up, and saw the round hole ten or twelve feet overhead, through which a dark hand had reached down with a flaring torch. A small basket, containing a loaf of coarse bread and a bottle of wine, was being lowered at the end of a cord.

Gaspard took the bread and wine, and the basket was drawn up. Before the withdrawal of the torch and the re-depositing of the slab, he contrived to make a hasty survey of his dungeon. The place was roughly circular, as he had surmised, and was perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. The thing over which he had stumbled was a human skeleton, lying half on the rubble-

heap, half in the filthy water. It was brown and rotten with age, and its garments had long melted away in patches of liquid mould.

The walls were guttered and runnelled by centuries of ooze and their very stone, it seemed, was rotting slowly to decay. In the opposite side, at the bottom, he saw the opening he had, suspected: a low mouth, not much bigger than a foxes' hole, into which the sluggish water fiowed. His heart sank at the sight; for, even if the water were deeper than it seemed, the hole was far too strait for the passage of a man's body. In a state of hopelessness that was like a veritable suffocation, he found his way back to the rubble-pile when the light had been withdrawn.

The loaf of bread and the bottle of wine were still in his hands. Mechanically, with dull, sodden hunger, he munched and drank. Afterwards he felt stronger; and the sour, common wine served to warm him and perhaps helped to inspire him with the idea which he presently conceived.

Finishing the bottle, he found his way across the dungeon to the low, burrow-like hole. The entering air current had strengthened, and this he took for a good omen, Drawing his dagger, he started to pick with the point at the half-rotten, decomposing wall, in an effort to enlarge the opening. He was forced to kneel in noisome silt; and the writhing coils of water-snakes, hissing frightfully, crawled across his legs as he worked. Evidently the hole was their means of ingress and egress, to and from the oubliette.

The stone crumbled readily beneath his dagger, and Gaspard forgot the horror and ghastliness of his situation in the hope of escape. He had no means of knowing the thickness of the wall; or the nature and extent of the subterrenes that lay beyond; but he felt sure that there was some channel of connection with the outer air.

For hours or days, it seemed, he toiled with his dagger, digging blindly at the soft wall and removing the dèbris that splashed in the water beside him. After a while, prone on his belly, he crept into the hole he had enlarged; and burrowing like some laborious mole, he made his way onwards inch by inch.

At last, to his prodigious relief, the dagger-point went through into empty space. He broke away with his hands the thin shell of obstructing stone that remained; then, crawling on in the darkness, he found that he could stand upright on a sort of shelving floor.

Straightening his cramped limbs, he moved on very cautiously. He was in a narrow vault or tunnel, whose sides he could touch simultaneously with his outstretched finger-tips. The floor was a downwards incline; and the water deepened, rising to his knees and then to his waist, Probably the place had once been used as an underground exit from the castle; and the roof, falling in, had dammed the water.

More than a little dismayed, Gaspard began to wonder if he had exchanged the foul, skeleton-haunted oubliette for something even worse. The night around and before him was still untouched by any ray, and the air-current, though strong, was laden with dankness and mouldiness as of interminable vaults.

Touching the tunnel-sides at intervals as he plunged hesitantly into the deepening water, he found a sharp angle, giving upon free space at his right. The space proved to be the mouth of an intersecting passage, whose flooded bottom was at least level and went no deeper into the stagnant foulness, Exploring it, he stumbled over the beginning of a flight of upward steps. Mounting these through the shoaling water, he soon found himself on dry stone.

The stairs, narrow, broken, irregular, without landings, appeared to wind in some eternal spiral that was coiled lightlessly about the bowels of Ylourgne. They were close and stifling as a tomb, and plainly they were not the source of the air-current which Gaspard had started to follow. Whither they would lead he knew not; nor could he tell if they were the same stairs by which he had been conducted to his dungeon. But he climbed steadily, pausing only at long intervals to regain his breath as best he could in the dead, mephitis-burdened air.

At length, in the solid darkness, far above, he began to hear a mysterious, muffled sound: a dull but recurrent crash as of mighty blocks and masses of falling stone. The sound was unspeakably ominous and dismal, and it seemed to shake the unfathomable walls around Gaspard, and to thrill with a sinister vibration in the steps on which he trod.

He climbed now with redoubled caution and alertness, stopping ever and anon to listen. The recurrent crashing noise grew louder, more ominous, as if it were immediately above; and the listener crouched on the dark stairs for a time that might have been many minutes, without daring to go farther.

At last, with disconcerting suddenness, the sound came to an end, leaving a strained and fearful stillness.

With many baleful conjectures, not knowing what fresh enormity he should find, Gaspard ventured to resume his climbing. Again, in the blank and solid stillness, he was met by a sound: the dim, reverberant chanting of voices, as in some Satanic mass or liturgy with dirge-like cadences that turned to intolerably soaring paeans of evil triumph. Long before he could recognize the words, he shivered at the strong, malefic throbbing of the measured rhythm, whose fall and rise appeared somehow to correspond to the heartbeats of some colossal demon.

The stairs turned, for the hundredth time in their tortuous spiral; and coming forth from that long midnight, Gaspard blinked in the wan glimmering that streamed towards him from above. The choral voices met him in a more sonorous burst of infernal sound, and he knew the words for those of a rare and potent incantation, used by sorcerers for a supremely foul, supremely maleficent purpose. Affrightedly, as he climbed the last steps, he knew the thing that was taking place amid the ruins of Ylourgne.

Lifting his head warily above the castle floor, he saw that the stairs ended in a far corner of the vast room in which he had beheld Nathaire's unthinkable creation. The whole extent of the internally dismantled building lay before him, filled with a weird glare in which the beams of the slightly gibbous moon were mingled with the ruddy flames of dying athanors and the coiling, multi-coloured tongues that rose from necromantic braziers.

Gaspard, for an instant, was puzzled by the flood of full moonlight amid the ruins. Then he saw that almost the whole inner wall of the castle, giving on the courtyard, had been removed. It was the tearing-down of the prodigious blocks, no doubt through an extrahuman labour levied by sorcery, that he had heard during his ascent from the subterrene vaults. His blood curdled, he felt an actual horripilation, as he realized the purpose for which the wall had been demolished.

It was evident that a whole day and part of another night had gone by since his immurement; for the moon rode high in the pale sapphire welkin. Bathed in its chilly glare, the huge vats no longer emitted their eerie and electric phosphorescence. The couch of Saracen fabrics, on which Gaspard had beheld the dying dwarf, was now half hidden from view by the mounting fumes of braziers and thuribles, amid which the sorcerer's ten

pupils, clad in sable and scarlet, were performing their hideous and repugnant rite, with its malefically measured litany.

Fearfully, as one who confronts an apparition reared up from nether hell, Gaspard beheld the colossus that lay inert as if in Cyclopean sleep on the castle flags. The thing was no longer a skeleton: the limbs were rounded into bossed, enormous thews, like the limbs of Biblical giants; the flanks were like an insuperable wall; the deltoids of the mighty chest were broad as platform; the hands could have crushed the bodies of men like millstones.… But the face of the stupendous monster, seen in profile athwart the pouring moon, was the face of the Satanic dwarf, Nathaire—re-magnified a hundred times, but the same in its implacable madness and malevolence!

The vast bosom seemed to rise and fall; and during a pause of the necromantic ritual, Gaspard heard the unmistakable sound of a mighty respiration. The eye in the profile was closed; but its lid appeared to tremble like a great curtain, as if the monster were about to wake; and the outflung hand, with fingers pale and bluish as a row of corpses, twitched unquietly on the castle flags.

An insupportable terror seized the watcher; but even this terror could not induce him to return to the noisome vaults he had left. With infinite hesitation and trepidation, he stole forth from the corner, keeping in a zone of ebon shadow that flanked the castle wall.

As he went, he saw for a moment, through bellying folds of vapour, the couch on which the shrunken form of Nathaire was lying pallid and motionless. It seemed that the dwarf was dead, or had fallen into a stupor preceding death. Then the choral voices, crying their dreadful incantation, rose higher in Satanic triumph; the vapours eddied like a hell-born cloud, coiling about the sorcerers in python-shaped volumes, and hiding again the Orient couch and its corpse-like occupant.

A thraldom of measureless evil oppressed the air. Gaspard felt that the awful transmigration, evoked and implored with everswelling, liturgic blasphemies, was about to take place—had perhaps already occurred. He thought that the breathing giant stirred, like one who tosses in light slumber.

Soon the towering, massively recumbent hulk was interposed between Gaspard and the chanting necromancers. They had not seen him; and he now dared to run swiftly, and gained the courtyard unpursued and

unchallenged. Thence, without looking back, he fled like a devil-hunted thing upon the steep and chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne.

7. The Coming of the Colossus

After the cessation of the exodus of liches, a universal terror still prevailed; a wide-flung shadow of apprehension, infernal and funereal, lay stagnantly on Averoigne. There were strange and disastrous portents in the aspect of the skies: flame-bearded meteors had been seen to fall beyond the eastern hills; a comet far in the south had swept the stars with its luminous bosom for a few nights, and had then faded, leaving among men the prophecy of bale and pestilence to come. By day the air was oppressed and sultry, and the blue heavens were heated as if by whitish fires. Clouds of thunder, darkling and withdrawn, shook their fulgurant lances on the far horizons, like some beleaguering Titan army. A murrain, such as would come from the working of wizard spells, was abroad among the cattle. All these signs and prodigies were an added heaviness on the burdened spirits of men, who went to and fro in daily fear of the hidden preparations and machinations of hell.

But, until the actual breaking-forth of the incubated menace, there was no one, save Gaspard du Nord, who had knowledge of its veritable form. And Gaspard, fleeing headlong beneath the gibbous moon towards Vyones, and fearing to hear the tread of a colossal pursuer at any moment, had thought it more than useless to give warning in such towns and villages as lay upon his line of sight. Where, indeed—even if warned—could men hope to hide themselves from the awful thing, begotten by Hell on the ravished charnel, that would walk forth like the Anakim to visit its roaring wrath on a trampled world?

So, all that night, and throughout the day that followed, Gaspard du Nord, with the dried slime of the oubliette on his briar-shredded raiment, plunged like a madman through the towering woods that were haunted by robbers and were-wolves. The westward-falling moon flickered in his eyes betwixt the gnarled sombre boles as he ran; and the dawn overtook him with the pale shafts of its searching arrows. The noon poured over him its white sultriness, like furnace-heated metal sublimed into light; and the clotted filth that clung to his tatters was again turned into slime by his own

sweat. But still he pursued his nightmare-harried way, while a vague, seemingly hopeless plan took form in his mind.

In the interim, several monks of the Cistercian brotherhood, watching the grey wall of Ylourgne at early dawn with their habitual vigilance, were the first, after Gaspard, to behold the monstrous horror created by the necromancers. Their account may have been somewhat tinged by a pious exaggeration; but they swore that the giant rose abruptly, standing more than waist-high above the ruins of the barbican, amid a sudden leaping of long-tongued fires and a swirling of pitchy fumes erupted from Malbolge. The giant's head was level with the high top of the donjon, and his right arm, out-thrust, lay like a bar of stormy cloud athwart the new-risen sun.

The monks fell grovelling to their knees, thinking that the Archfoe himself had come forth, using Ylourgne for his gateway from the Pit. Then, across the mile-wide valley, they heard a thunderous peal of demoniac laughter; and the giant, climbing over the mounded barbican at a single step, began to descend the scarped and craggy hill.

When he drew nearer, bounding from slope to slope, his features were manifestly those of some great devil animated with ire and malice towards the sons of Adam. His hair, in matted locks, streamed behind him like a mass of black pythons; his naked skin was livid and pale and cadaverous, with the skin of the dead; but beneath it, the stupendous thews of a Titan swelled and rippled. The eyes, wide and glaring flamed like lidless cauldrons heated by the fires of the unplumbed Pit.

The rumour of his coming passed like a gale of terror through the Monastery. Many of the Brothers, deeming discretion the better part of religious fervour, hid themselves in the stone-hewn cellars and vaults. Others crouched in their cells, mumbling and shrieking incoherent pleas to all the Saints. Still others, the most courageous, repaired in a body to the chapel and knelt in solemn prayer before the wooden Christ on the great crucifix.

Bernard and Stephane, now somewhat recovered from their grievous beating, alone dared to watch the advance of the giant. Their horror was inexpressibly increased when they began to recognize in the colossal features a magnified likeness to the lineaments of that evil dwarf who had presided over the dark, unhallowed activities of Ylourgne; and the laughter of the colossus, as he came down the valley, was like a tempest-borne echo

of the damnable cachinnation that had followed their ignominious flight from the haunted stronghold. To Bernard and Stephane, however, it seemed merely that the dwarf, who was no doubt an actual demon, had chosen to appear in his natural form.

Pausing in the valley-bottom, the giant stood opposite the monastery with his flame-filled eyes on a level with the window from which Bemard and Stephane were peering. He laughed again—an awful laugh, like a subterranean rurnbling—and then, stooping, he picked up a handful of boulders as if they had been pebbles, and proceeded to pelt the monastery. The boulders crashed against the walls, as if hurled from great catapults or mangonels of war; but the stout building held, though shaken grievously.

Then, with both hands, the colossus tore loose an immense rock that was deeply embedded in the hillside; and lifting this rock, he flung it at the stubborn walls. The tremendous mass broke in an entire side of the chapel; and those who had gathered therein were found later, crushed into bloody pulp amid the splinters of their carven Christ.

After that, as if disdaining to palter any further with a prey so insignificant, the colossus turned his back on the little monastery, and like some fiend-born Goliath, went roaring down the valley into Averoigne.

As he departed, Bernard and Stephane, still watching from their window, saw a thing they had not perceived heretofore: a huge basket made of planking, that hung suspended by ropes between the giant's shoulders. In the basket, ten men—the pupils and assistants of Nathaire—were being carried like so many dolls or puppets in a peddler's pack.

Of the subsequent wanderings and depredations of the colossus, a hundred legends were long current throughout Averoigne: tales of an unexampled ghastliness, a wanton diabolism without parallel in all the histories of that demon-pestered land.

The goatherds of the hills below Ylourgne saw him coming, and fled with their nimble-footed flocks to the highest ridges. To these he paid little heed, merely trampling them down like beetles when they could not escape from his path. Following the hillstream that was the source of the river Isoile, he came to the verge of the great forest; and here, it is related, he tore up a towering ancient pine by the roots, and snapping off the mighty boughs with his hands, shaped it into a cudgel which he carried henceforward.

With this cudgel, heavier than a battering-ram, he pounded into shapeless ruin a wayside shrine in the outer woods. A hamlet fell in his way, and he strode through it, beating in the roofs, toppling the walls, and crushing the inhabitants beneath his feet.

To and fro in a mad frenzy of destruction, like a deathdrunken Cyclops, he wandered all that day. Even the fierce beasts of the woodland ran from him in fear. The wolves, in mid-hunt, abandoned their quarry and retired, howling dismally with terror, to their rocky dens. The black, savage hunting-dogs of the forest barons would not face him, and hid whimpering in their kennels.

Men heard his mighty laughter, his stormy bellowing; they saw his approach from a distance of many leagues, and fled or concealed themselves as best they could. The lords of moated castles called in their men-at-arms, drew up their drawbridges and prepared as if for the siege of an army. The peasants hid themselves in caverns, in cellars, in old wells, and even beneath hay-mounds, hoping that he would pass them by unnoticed. The churches were crammed with refugees who sought protection of the Cross, deeming that Satan himself, or one of his chief lieutenants, had risen to harry and lay waste the land.

In a voice like summer thunder, mad maledictions, unthinkable obscenities and blasphemies were uttered ceaselessly by the giant as he went to and fro. Men heard him address the litter of black-clad figures that he carried on his back, in tones of admonishment or demonstration such as a master would use to his pupils. People who had known Nathaire recognized the incredible likeness of the huge features, the similarity of the swollen voice to his. A rumour went abroad that the dwarf sorcerer, through his loathly bond with the Adversary, had been permitted to transfer his hateful soul into this Titanic form; and, bearing his pupils with him, had returned to vent an insatiable ire, a bottomless rancour, on the world that had mocked him for his puny physique and reviled him for his sorcery. The charnel genesis of the monstrous avatar was also rumoured; and, indeed it was said that the colossus had openly proclaimed his identity.

It would be tedious to make explicit mention of all the enormities, all the atrocities, that were ascribed to the marauding giant.… There were people —mostly priests and women, it is told—whom he picked up as they fled,

and pulled limb from limb as a child might quarter an insect.… And there were worse things, not to be named in this record.…

Many eye-witnesses told how he hunted Pierre, the Lord of La Frênaie, who had gone forth with his dogs and men to chase a noble stag in the nearby forest Overtaking horse and rider, he caught them with one hand, and bearing them aloft as he strode over the tree-tops, he hurled them later against the granite walls of the Chateau of La Frênaie in passing. Then, catching the red stag that Pierre had hunted, he flung it after them; and the huge bloody blotches made by the impact of the bashed bodies remained long on the castle stone, and were never wholly washed away by the autumn rains and the winter snows.

Countless tales were told, also, of the deeds of obscene sacrilege and profanation committed by the colossus: of the wooden Virgin that he flung into the Isoile above Ximes, lashed with human gut to the rotting, mail-clad body of an infamous outlaw; of the wormy corpses that he dug with his hands from unconsecrated graves and hurled into the courtyard of the Benedictine abbey of Perigon; of the Church of Ste. Zenobie, which he buried with its priests and congregation beneath a mountain of ordure made by the gathering of all the dungheaps from neighbouring farms.

8. The Laying of the Colossus

Back and forth, in an irregular, drunken, zigzag course, from end to end and side to side of the harried realm, the giant strode without pause, like an energumen possessed by some implacable fiend of mischief and murder, leaving behind him, as a reaper leaves his swath, an ever-lengthening zone of havoc, of rapine and carnage. And when the sun, blackened by the smoke of burning villages, had set luridly beyond the forest, men still saw him moving in the dusk, and heard still the portentous rumbling of his mad, stormy cachinnation.

Nearing the gates of Vyones at sunset, Gaspard du Nord saw behind him, through gaps in the ancient wood, the far-off head and shoulders of the terrible colossus, who moved along the Isoile, stooping from sight at intervals in some horrid deed.

Though numb with weariness and exhaustion, Gaspard quickened his flight. He did not believe, however, that the monster would try to invade

Vyones, the especial object of Nathaire's hatred and malice, before the following day. The evil soul of the sorcerous dwarf, exulting in its almost infinite capacity for harm and destruction, would defer the crowning act of vengeance, and would continue to terrorize, during the night, the outlying villages and rural districts.

In spite of his rags and filth, which rendered him practically unrecognizable and gave him a most disreputable air, Gaspard was admitted without question by the guards at the city gate. Vyones was already thronged with people who had fled to the sanctuary of its stout walls from the adjacent countryside; and no one, not even of the most dubious character, was denied admittance. The walls were lined with archers and pike-bearers, gathered in readiness to dispute the entrance of the giant. Crossbowmen were stationed above the gates, and mangonels were mounted at short intervals along the entire circuit of the ramparts. The city seethed and hummed like an agitated hive.

Hysteria and pandemonium prevailed in the streets. Pale, panic-stricken faces milled everywhere in an aimless stream. Hurrying torches flared dolorously in the twilight that deepened as if with the shadow of impending wings arisen from Erebus. The gloom was clogged with intangible fear, with webs of stifling oppression. Through all this rout of wild disorder and frenzy, Gaspard, like a spent but indomitable swimmer breasting some tide of eternal, viscid nightmare, made his way slowly to his attic lodgings.

Afterwards, he could scarcely remember eating and drinking. Overworn beyond the limit of bodily and spiritual endurance, he threw himself down on his pallet without removing his ooze-stiffened tatters, and slept soddenly till an hour half-way between midnight and dawn.

He awoke with the death-pale beams of the gibbous moon shining upon him through his window; and rising, spent the balance of the night in making certain occult preparations which, he felt, offered the only possibility of coping with the fiendish monster that had been created and animated by Nathaire.

Working feverishly by the light of the westering moon and a single dim taper, Gaspard assembled various ingredients of familiar alchemic use which he possessed, and compounded from these, through a long and somewhat cabalistic process, a dark-grey powder which he had seen employed by Nathaire on numerous occasions. He had reasoned that the

colossus, being formed from the bones and flesh of dead men unlawfully raised up, and energized only by the soul of a dead sorcerer, would be subject to the influence of this powder, which Nathaire had used for the laying of resurrected liches. The powder, if cast in the nostrils of such cadavers, would cause them to, return peacefully to their tombs and lie down in a renewed slumber of death.

Gaspard made a considerable quantity of the mixture, arguing that no mere finger-pinch would suffice for the lulling of the gigantic charnel monstrosity. His guttering yellow candle was dimmed by the white dawn as he ended the Latin formula of fearsome verbal invocation from which the compound would derive much of its efficacy. The formula, which called for the cooperation of Alastor and other evil spirits, he used with unwillingness. But he knew that there was no alternative: sorcery could be fought only with sorcery.

Morning came with new terrors to Vyones. Gaspard had felt, through a sort of intuition, that the vengeful colossus, who was said to have wandered with unhuman tirelessness and diabolic energy all night through Averoigne, would approach the hated city early in the day. His intuition was confirmed; for scarcely had he finished his occult labours when he heard a mounting hubbub in the streets, and above the shrill, dismal clamour of frightened voices, the far-off roaring of the giant.

Gaspard knew that he must lose no time, if he were to post himself in a place of vantage from which he could throw his powder into the nostrils of the hundred-foot colossus. The city walls and even most of the church spires, were not lofty enough for this purpose; and a brief reflection told him that the great cathedral, standing at the core of Vyones, was the one place from whose roof he could front the invader with success. He felt sure that the men-at-arms on the walls could do little to prevent the monster from entering and wreaking his malevolent will. No earthly weapon could injure a being of such bulk and nature; for even a cadaver of normal size, reared up in this fashion, could be shot full of arrows or transfixed by a dozen pikes without retarding its progress.

Hastily he filled a huge leathern pouch with the powder; and carrying the pouch at his belt, he joined the agitated press of pople in the street. Many were fleeing towards the cathedral, to seek the shelter of its august sanctity; and he had only to let himself be borne along by the frenzy-driven stream.

The cathedral nave was packed with worshippers, and solemn masses were being said by priests whose voices faltered at times with inward panic. Unheeded by the wan, despairing throng, Gaspard found a flight of coiling stairs that led tortuously to the gargoyle-warded roof of the high tower.

Here he posted himself, crouching behind the stone figure of a cat-headed griffin. From his vantage he could see, beyond the crowded spires and gables, the approaching giant, whose head and torso loomed above the city walls. A cloud of arrows, visible even at that distance, rose to meet the monster, who apparently did not even pause to pluck them from his hide. Great boulders hurled from mangonels were no more to him than a pelting of gravel; the heavy bolts of arbalests, embedded in his flesh, were mere slivers.

Nothing could stay his advance. The tiny figures of a company of pikemen, who opposed him with out-thrust weapons, swept from the wall above the eastern gate by a single sidelong blow of the seventy-foot pine that he bore for a cudgel. Then, having cleared the wall, the colossus climbed over it into Vyones.

Roaring, chuckling, laughing like a maniacal Cyclops, he strode along the narrow streets between houses that rose only to his waist, trampling without mercy everyone who could not escape in time, and smashing in the roofs with stupendous blows of his bludgeon. With a push of his left hand he broke off the protruding gables, and overturned the church steeples with their bells clanging in dolorous alarm as they went down. A woeful shrieking and wailing of hysteria-laden voices accompanied his passing.

Straight towards the cathedral he came, as Gaspard had calculated, feeling that the high edifice would be made the special butt of his malevolence.

The streets were now emptied of people; but, as if to hunt them out and crush them in their hiding-places, the giant thrust his cudgel like a battering-ram through walls and windows and roofs as he went by. The ruin and havoc that he left was indescribable.

Soon he loomed opposite the cathedral tower on which Gaspard waited behind the gargoyle. His head was level with the tower, and his eyes flamed like wells of burning brimstone as he drew near. His lips were parted over stalactitic fangs in a hateful snarl; and he cried out in a voice like the rumbling of articulate thunder:

“Ho! Ye puling priests and devotees of a powerless God! Come forth and bow to Nathaire the master, before he sweeps you into limbo!”

It was then that Gaspard, with a hardihood beyond comparison, rose from his hiding-place and stood in full view of the raging colossus.

“Draw nearer, Nathaire, if indeed it be you, foul robber of tombs and charnels,” he taunted. “Come close, for I would hold speech with you.”

A monstrous look of astonishment dimmed the diabolic rage on the colossal features. Peering at Gaspard as if in doubt or incredulity, the giant lowered his lifted cudgel and stepped close to the tower, till his face was only a few feet from the intrepid student. Then, when he had apparently convinced himself of Gaspard’s identity, the look of maniacal wrath returned, flooding his eyes with Tartarean fire and twisting his lineaments into a mask of Apollyon-like malignity. His left arm came up in a prodigious arc, with twitching fingers that poised horribly above the head of the youth, casting upon him a vulture-black shadow in the full-risen sun. Gaspard saw the white, startled faces of the necromancer’s pupils, peering over his shoulder from their plank-built basket.

“Is it you, Gaspard, my recreant pupil?” the colossus roared stormily. “I thought you were rotting in the oubliette beneath Ylourgne—and now I find you perched atop of this accursed cathedral which I am about to demolish!… You had been far wiser to remain where I left you, my good Gaspard.”

His breath, as he spoke, blew like a charnel-polluted gale on the student. His vast fingers, with blackened nails like shovelblades, hovered in ogreish menace. Gaspard had furtively loosened his leathern pouch that hung at his belt, and had untied its mouth. Now, as the twitching fingers descended towards him, he emptied the contents of the pouch in the giant’s face, and the fine powder, mounting in a dark-grey cloud, obscured the snarling lips and palpitating nostrils from his view.

Anxiously he watched the effect, fearing that the powder might be useless after all, against the superior arts and Satanical resources of Nathaire. But miraculously, as it seemed, the evil lambence died in the pit-deep eyes, as the monster inhaled the flying cloud. His lifted hand, narrowly missing the crouching youth in its sweep, fell lifelessly at his side. The anger was erased from the mighty, contorted mask, as if from the face of a dead man; the great cudgel fell with a crash to the empty street; and with

drowsy, lurching steps, and listless, hanging arms, the giant turned his back to the cathedral and retraced his way through the devastated city.

He muttered dreamily to himself as he went; and people who heard him swore that the voice was no longer the awful, thunderswollen voice of Nathaire, but the tones and accents of a multitude of men, amid which the voices of certain of the ravished dead were recognizable. And the voice of Nathaire himself, no louder now than in life, was heard at intervals through the manifold mutterings, as if protesting angrily.

Climbing the eastern wall as it had come, the colossus went to and fro for many hours, no longer wreaking a hellish wrath and rancour, but searching, as people thought, for the various tombs and graves from which the hundreds of bodies that composed it had been so foully reft. From charnel to charnel, from cemetery to cemetery it went, through all the land; but there was no grave anywhere in which the dead colossus could lie down.

Then, towards evening, men saw it from afar on the red rim of the sky, digging with its hands in the soft, loamy plain beside the river Isoile. There, in a monstrous and self-made grave, the colossus laid itself down, and did not rise again. The ten pupils of Nathaire, it was believed, unable to descend from their basket, were crushed beneath the mighty body; for none of them was ever seen thereafter.

For many days no one dared to approach the place where the corpse lay uncovered in its self-dug grave. And so the thing rotted prodigiously beneath the summer sun, breeding a mighty stench that wrought pestilence in that portion of Averoigne. And they who ventured to go near in the following autumn, when the stench had lessened greatly, swore that the voice of Nathaire, still protesting angrily, was heard by them to issue from the enormous, rook-haunted bulk.

Of Gaspard du Nord, who had been the saviour of the province, it was related that he lived in much honour to a ripe age, being the one sorcerer of that region who at no time incurred the disapprobation of the Church.

THE CHAIN OF AFORGOMON

***Weird Tales*, Dec. 1935.**

It is indeed strange that John Milwarp and his writings should have fallen so speedily into semi-oblivion. His books, treating of Oriental life in a somewhat flowery, romantic style, were popular a few months ago. But now, in spite of their range and penetration, their pervasive verbal sorcery, they are seldom mentioned; and they seem to have vanished unaccountably from the shelves of book-stores and libraries.

Even the mystery of Milwarp's death, baffling to both law and science, has evoked but a passing interest, an excitement quickly lulled and forgotten.

I was well acquainted with Milwarp over a term of years. But my recollection of the man is becoming strangely blurred, like an image in a misted mirror. His dark, half-alien personality, his preoccupation with the occult, his immense knowledge of Eastern life and lore, are things I remember with such effort and vagueness as attends the recovery of a dream. Sometimes I almost doubt that he ever existed. It is as if the man, and all that pertains to him, were being erased from human record by some mysterious acceleration of the common process of obliteration.

In his will, he appointed me his executor. I have vainly tried to interest publishers in the novel he left among his papers: a novel surely not inferior to anything he ever wrote. They say that his vogue has passed. Now I am publishing as a magazine story the contents of the diary kept by Milwarp for a period preceding his demise.

Perhaps, for the open-minded, this diary will explain the enigma of his death. It would seem that the circumstances of that death are virtually forgotten, and I repeat them here as part of my endeavor to revive and perpetuate Milwarp's memory.

Milwarp had returned to his house in San Francisco after a long sojourn in Indo-China. We who knew him gathered that he had gone into places seldom visited by Occidentals. At the time of his demise he had just finished correcting the typescript of a novel which dealt with the more romantic and mysterious aspects of Burma.

On the morning of April 2nd, 1933, his housekeeper, a middle-aged woman, was startled by a glare of brilliant light which issued from the half-open door of Milwarp's study. It was as if the whole room were in flames. Horrified, the woman hastened to investigate. Entering the study, she saw her master sitting in an armchair at the table, wearing the rich, somber robes of Chinese brocade which he affected as a dressing-gown. He sat stiffly erect, a pen clutched unmoving in his fingers on the open pages of a manuscript volume. About him, in a sort of nimbus, glowed and flickered the strange light; and her only thought was that his garments were on fire.

She ran toward him, crying out a warning. At that moment the weird nimbus brightened intolerably, and the wan early dayshine, the electric bulbs that still burned to attest the night's labor, were alike blotted out. It seemed to the housekeeper that something had gone wrong with the room itself; for the walls and table vanished, and a great, luminous gulf opened before her; and on the verge of the gulf, in a seat that was not his cushioned armchair but a huge and rough-hewn seat of stone, she beheld her master stark and rigid. His heavy brocaded robes were gone, and about him, from head to foot, were blinding coils of pure white fire, in the form of linked chains. She could not endure the brilliance of the chains, and cowering back, she shielded her eyes with her hands. When she dared to look again, the weird glowing had faded, the room was as usual; and Milwarp's motionless figure was seated at the table in the posture of writing.

Shaken and terrified as she was, the woman found courage to approach her master. A hideous smell of burnt flesh arose from beneath his garments, which were wholly intact and without visible trace of fire. He was dead, his fingers clenched on the pen and his features frozen in a stare of tetanic agony. His neck and wrists were completely encircled by frightful burns that had charred them deeply. The coroner, in his examination, found that these burns, preserving an outline as of heavy links, were extended in long unbroken spirals around the arms and legs and torso. The burning was apparently the cause of Milwarp's death: it was as if iron chains, heated to incandescence, had been wrapped about him.

Small credit was given to the housekeeper's story of what she had seen. No one, however, could suggest an acceptable explanation of the bizarre mystery. There was, at the time, much aimless discussion; but, as I have hinted, people soon turned to other matters. The efforts made to solve the

riddle were somewhat perfunctory. Chemists tried to determine the nature of a queer drug, in the form of a gray powder with pearly granules, to whose use Milwarp had become addicted. But their tests merely revealed the presence of an alkaloid whose source and attributes were obscure to Western science.

Day by day, the whole incredible business lapsed from public attention; and those who had known Milwarp began to display the forgetfulness that was no less unaccountable than his weird doom. The housekeeper, who had held steadfastly in the beginning to her story, came at length to share the common dubiety. Her account, with repetition, became vague and contradictory; detail by detail, she seemed to forget the abnormal circumstances that she had witnessed with overwhelming horror.

The manuscript volume, in which Milwarp had apparently been writing at the time of death, was given into my charge with his other papers. It proved to be a diary, its last entry breaking off abruptly. Since reading the diary, I have hastened to transcribe it in my own hand, because, for some mysterious reason, the ink of the original is already fading and has become almost illegible in places.

The reader will note certain lacunae, due to passages written in an alphabet which neither I nor any scholar of my acquaintance can transliterate. These passages seem to form an integral part of the narrative, and they occur mainly toward the end, as if the writer had turned more and more to a language remembered from his ancient avatar. To the same mental reversion one must attribute the singular dating, in which Milwarp, still employing English script, appears to pass from our contemporary notation to that of some premundane world.

I give hereunder the entire diary, which begins with an undated footnote:

> This book, unless I have been misinformed concerning the qualities of the drug *souvara*, will be the record of my former life in a lost cycle. I have had the drug in my possession for seven months, but fear has prevented me from using it. Now, by certain tokens, I perceive that the longing for knowledge will soon overcome the fear. Ever since my earliest childhood I have been troubled by intimations, dim, unplaceable, that seemed to argue a forgotten existence. These intimations partook of the nature of feelings rather than ideas or

images: they were like the wraiths of dead memories. In the background of my mind there has lurked a sentiment of formless, melancholy desire for some nameless beauty long perished out of time. And, coincidentally, I have been haunted by an equally formless dread, an apprehension as of some bygone but still imminent doom.

Such feelings have persisted, undiminished, throughout my youth and maturity, but nowhere have I found any clue to their causation. My travels in the mystic Orient, my delvings into occultism have merely convinced me that these shadowy intuitions pertain to some incarnation buried under the wreck of remotest cycles.

Many times, in my wanderings through Buddhistic lands, I had heard of the drug *souvara*, which is believed to restore, even for the uninitiate, the memory of other lives. And at last, after many vain efforts, I managed to procure a supply of the drug. The manner in which I obtained it is a tale sufficiently remarkable in itself, but of no special relevance here. So far—perhaps because of that apprehension which I have hinted—I have not dared to use the drug.

March 9th, 1933. This morning I took *souvara* for the first time, dissolving the proper amount in pure distilled water as I had been instructed to do. Afterward I leaned back easily in my chair, breathing with a slow, regular rhythm. I had no preconceived idea of the sensations that would mark the drug's initial effect, since these were said to vary prodigiously with the temperament of the users; but I composed myself to await them with tranquility, after formulating clearly in my mind the purpose of the experinent. For a while there was no change in my awareness. I noticed a slight quickening of the pulse, and modulated my breathing in conformity with this. Then, by slow degrees, I experienced a sharpening of visual perception. The Chinese rugs on the floor, the backs of the serried volumes in my bookcases, the very wood of chairs, table and shelves, began to exhibit new and unimagined colors. At the same time there were curious alterations of outline, every object seeming to extend itself in a hitherto unsuspected fashion. Following this, my surroundings became semi-transparent, like molded shapes of mist. I found that I could see through the

marbled cover the illustrations in a volume of John Martin's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which lay before me on the table.

All this, I knew, was a mere extension of ordinary physical vision. It was only a prelude to those apperceptions of occult realms which I sought through *souvara*. Fixing my mind once more on the goal of the experiment, I became aware that the misty walls had vanished like a drawn arras. About me, like reflections in rippled water, dim sceneries wavered and shifted, erasing one another from instant to instant. I seemed to hear a vague but ever-present sound, more musical than the murmurs of air, water or fire, which was a property of the unknown element that environed me.

With a sense of troublous familiarity, I beheld the blurred unstable pictures which flowed past me upon this never-resting medium. Orient temples, flashing with sun-struck bronze and gold; the sharp, crowded gables and spires of medieval cities; tropic and northern forests; the costumes and physiognomies of the Levant, of Persia, of old Rome and Carthage, went by like blown, flying mirages. Each succeeding tableau belonged to a more ancient period than the one before it—and I knew that each was a scene from some former existence of my own.

Still tethered, as it were, to my present self, I reviewed these visible memories, which took on tri-dimensional depth and clarity. I saw myself as warrior and troubadour, as noble and merchant and mendicant. I trembled with dead fears, I thrilled with lost hopes and raptures, and was drawn by ties that death and Lethe had broken. Yet never did I fully identify myself with those other avatars: for I knew well that the memory I sought pertained to some incarnation of older epochs.

Still the fantasmagoria streamed on, and I turned giddy with vertigo ineffable before the vastness and diuturnity of the cycles of being. It seemed that I, the watcher, was lost in a gray land where the homeless ghosts of all dead ages went fleeing from oblivion to oblivion.

The walls of Nineveh, the columns and towers of unnamed cities, rose before me and were swept away. I saw the luxuriant plains that are now the Gobi desert. The sealost capitals of Atlantis were drawn

to the light in unquenched glory. I gazed on lush and cloudy scenes from the first continents of Earth. Briefly I relived the beginnings of terrestrial man—and knew that the secret I would learn was ancienter even than these.

My visions faded into black voidness—and yet, in that void, through fathomless eons, it seemed that I existed still like a blind atom in the space between the worlds. About me was the darkness and repose of that night which antedated the Earth's creation. Time flowed backward with the silence of dreamless sleep.…

The illumination, when it came, was instant and complete. I stood in the full, fervid blaze of day amid royally towering blossoms in a deep garden, beyond whose lofty, vine-clad walls I heard the confused murmuring of the great city called Kalood. Above me, at their vernal zenith, were the four small suns that illumed the planet Hestan. Jewel-colored insects fluttered about me, lighting without fear on the rich habiliments of gold and black, enwrought with astronomic symbols, in which I was attired. Beside me was a dial-shaped altar of zoned agate, carved with the same symbols, which were those of the dreadful omnipotent time-god, Aforgomon, whom I served as a priest.

I had not even the slightest memory of myself as John Milwarp, and the long pageant of my terrestrial lives was as something that had never been—or was yet to be. Sorrow and desolation choked my heart as ashes fill some urn consecrated to the dead; and all the hues and perfumes of the garden about me were redolent only of the bitterness of death. Gazing darkly upon the altar, I muttered blasphemy against Aforgomon, who, in his inexorable course, had taken away my beloved and had sent no solace for my grief. Separately I cursed the signs upon the altar: the stars, the worlds, the suns, the moons, that meted and fulfilled the processes of time. Belthoris, my betrothed, had died at the end of the previous autumn: and so, with double maledictions, I cursed the stars and planets presiding over that season.

I became aware that a shadow had fallen beside my own on the altar, and knew that the dark sage and sorcerer Atmox had obeyed my summons. Fearfully but not without hope I turned toward him, noting first of all that he bore under his arm a heavy, sinister-looking volume

with covers of black steel and hasps of adamant. Only when I had made sure of this did I lift my eyes to his face, which was little less somber and forbidding than the tome he carried.

"Greeting, O Calaspa," he said harshly. "I have come against my own will and judgment. The lore that you request is in this volume; and since you saved me in former years from the inquisitorial wrath of the time-god's priests, I cannot refuse to share it with you. But understand well that even I, who have called upon names that are dreadful to utter, and have evoked forbidden presences, shall never dare to assist you in this conjuration. Gladly would I help you to hold converse with the shadow of Belthoris, or to animate her still unwithered body and draw it forth from the tomb. But that which you purpose is another matter. You alone must perform the ordained rites, must speak the necessary words: for the consequences of this thing will be direr than you deem."

"I care not for the consequences," I replied eagerly, "if it be possible to bring back the lost hours which I shared with Belthoris. Think you that I could content myself with her shadow, wandering thinly back from the Borderland? Or that I could take pleasure in the fair clay that the breath of necromancy has troubled and has made to arise and walk without mind or soul? Nay, the Belthoris I would summon is she on whom the shadow of death has never yet fallen!

It seemed that Atmox, the master of doubtful arts, the vassal of umbrageous powers, recoiled and blenched before my vehement declaration.

"Bethink you," he said with minatory sternness, "that this thing will constitute a breach of the sacred logic of time and a blasphemy against Aforgomon, god of the minutes and the cycles. Moreover, there is little to be gained: for not in its entirety may you bring back the season of your love, but only one single hour, torn with infinite violence from its rightful period in time.… Refrain, I adjure you, and content yourself with a lesser sorcery."

"Give me the book," I demanded. "My service to Aforgomon is forfeit. With due reverence and devotion I have worshipped the time-god, and have done in his honor the rites ordained from eternity; and for all this the god has betrayed me."

Then, in that high-climbing, luxuriant garden beneath the four suns, Atmox opened the adamantine clasps of the steel-bound volume; and, turning to a certain page, he laid the book reluctantly in my hands. The page, like its fellows, was of some unholy parchment streaked with musty discolorations and blackening at the margin with sheer antiquity; but upon it shone unquenchably the dread characters a primal age had written with an ink bright as the newshed ichor of demons. Above this page I bent in my madness, conning it over and over till I was dazzled by the fiery runes; and, shutting my eyes, I saw them burn on a red darkness, still legible, and writhing like hellish worms.

Hollowly, like the sound of a far bell, I heard the voice of Atmox: "You have learned, O Calaspa, the unutterable name of that One whose assistance can alone restore the fled hours. And you have learned the incantation that will rouse that hidden power, and the sacrifice needed for its propitiation. Knowing these things, is your heart still strong and your purpose firm?"

The name I had read in the wizard volume was that of the chief cosmic power antagonistic to Aforgomon; the incantation and the required offering were those of a foul demonolatry. Nevertheless, I did not hesitate, but gave resolute affirmative answer to the somber query of Atmox.

Perceiving that I was inflexible, he bowed his head, trying no more to dissuade me. Then, as the flame-runed volume had bade me do, I defiled the altar of Aforgomon, blotting certain of its prime symbols with dust and spittle.

While Atmox looked on in silence, I wounded my right arm to its deepest vein on the sharp-tipped gnomon of the dial; and, letting the blood drip from zone to zone, from orb to orb on the graven agate, I made unlawful sacrifice, and intoned aloud, in the name of the Lurking Chaos, Xexanoth, an abominable ritual composed by a backward repetition and jumbling of litanies sacred to the time-god.

Even as I chanted the incantation, it seemed that webs of shadow were woven foully athwart the suns; and the ground shook a little, as if colossal demons trod the world's rim, striding stupendously from abysses beyond. The garden walls and trees wavered like a wind-

blown reflection in a pool; and I grew faint with the loss of that life-blood I had poured out in demonolatrous offering. Then, in my flesh and in my brain, I felt the intolerable racking of a vibration like the long-drawn shock of cities riven by earthquake, and coasts crumbling before some chaotic sea; and my flesh was torn and harrowed, and my brain shuddered with the toneless discords sweeping through me from deep to deep.

I faltered, and confusion gnawed at my inmost being. Dimly I heard the prompting of Atmox, and dimmer still was the sound of my own voice that made answer to Xexanoth, naming the impious necromancy which was to be effected only through its power. Madly I implored from Xexanoth, in despite of time and its ordered seasons, one hour of that bygone autumn which I had shared with Belthoris; and imploring this, I named no special hour: for all, in memory, had seemed of an equal joy and gladness.

As the words ceased upon my lips, I thought that darkness fluttered in the air like a great wing; and the four suns went out, and my heart was stilled as if in death. Then the light returned, falling obliquely from suns mellow with full-tided autumn; and nowhere beside me was there any shadow of Atmox; and the altar of zoned agate was bloodless and undefiled. I, the lover of Belthoris, witting not of the doom and sorrow to come, stood happily with my beloved before the altar, and saw her young hands crown its ancient dial with the flowers we had plucked from the garden.

Dreadful beyond all fathoming are the mysteries of time. Even I, the priest and initiate, though wise in the secret doctrines of Aforgomon, know little enough of that elusive, ineluctable process whereby the present becomes the past and the future resolves itself into the present. All men have pondered the riddles of duration and transience; have wondered, vainly, to what bourn the lost days and the sped cycles are consigned. Some have dreamt that the past abides unchanged, becoming eternity as it slips from our mortal ken; and others have deemed that time is a stairway whose steps crumble one by one behind the climber, falling into a gulf of nothing.

Howsoever this may be, I know that she who stood beside me was the Belthoris on whom no shadow of mortality had yet descended.

The hour was one new-born in a golden season; and the minutes to come were pregnant with all wonder and surprise belonging to the untried future.

Taller was my beloved than the frail, unbowed lilies of the garden. In her eyes was the sapphire of moonless evenings sown with small golden stars. Her lips were strangely curved, but only blitheness and joy had gone to their shaping. She and I had been betrothed from our childhood, and the time of the marriage-rites was now approaching. Our intercourse was wholly free, according to the custom of that world. Often she came to walk with me in my garden and to decorate the altar of that god whose revolving moons and suns would soon bring the season of our felicity.

The moths that flew about us, winged with aerial cloth-of-gold, were no lighter than our hearts. Making blithe holiday, we fanned our frolic mood to a high flame of rapture. We were akin to the full-hued, climbing flowers, the swift-darting insects, and our spirits blended and soared with the perfumes that were drawn skyward in the warm air. Unheard by us was the loud murmuring of the mighty city of Kalood lying beyond my garden walls; for us the many-peopled planet known as Hestan no longer existed; and we dwelt alone in a universe of light, in a blossomed heaven. Exalted by love in the high harmony of those moments, we seemed to touch eternity; and even I, the priest of Aforgomon, forgot the blossom-fretting days, the system-devouring cycles.

In the sublime folly of passion, I swore then that death or discord could never mar the perfect communion of our hearts. After we had wreathed the altar, I sought the rarest, the most delectable flowers; frail-curving cups of winewashed pearl, of moony azure and white with scrolled purple lips; and these I twined, between kisses and laughter, in the blaze maze of Belthoris' hair; saying that another shrine than that of time should receive its due offering.

Tenderly, with a lover's delay, I lingered over the wreathing; and, ere I had finished, there fluttered to the ground beside us a great, crimson-spotted moth whose wing had somehow been broken in its airy voyaging through the garden. And Belthoris, ever tender of heart and pitiful, turned from me and took up the moth in her hands; and

some of the bright blossoms dropped from her hair unheeded. Tears welled from her deep blue eyes; and seeing that the moth was sorely hurt and would never fly again, she refused to be comforted; and no longer would she respond to my passionate wooing. I, who grieved less for the moth than she, was somewhat vexed; and between her sadness and my vexation, there grew between us some tiny, temporary rift.…

Then, ere love had ended the misunderstanding; then while we stood before the dread altar of time with sundered hands, with eyes averted from each other, it seemed that a shroud of darkness descended upon the garden. I heard the crash and crumbling of shattered worlds, and a black flowing of ruinous things that went past me through the darkness. The dead leaves of winter were blown about me, and there was a falling of tears or rain.… Then the vernal suns came back, high-stationed in cruel splendor; and with them came the knowledge of all that had been, of Belthoris' death and my sorrow, and the madness that had led to forbidden sorcery. Vain now, like all other hours, was the resummoned hour; and doubly irredeemable was my loss. My blood dripped heavily on the dishallowed altar, my faintness grew deathly, and I saw through murky mist the face of Atmox beside me; and the face was like that of some comminatory demon.…

March 13th. I, John Milwarp, write this date and my name with an odd dubiety. My visionary experience under the drug *souvara* ended with that rilling of my blood on the symboled dial, that glimpse of the terror-distorted face of Atmox. All this was in another world, in a life removed from the present by births and deaths without number; and yet, it seems, not wholly have I returned from the twice-ancient past. Memories, broken but strangely vivid and living, press upon me from the existence of which my vision was a fragment; and portions of the lore of Hestan, and scraps of its history, and words from its lost language, arise unbidden in my mind.

Above all, my heart is still shadowed by the sorrow of Calaspa. His desperate necromancy, which would seem to others no more than a dream within a dream, is stamped as with fire on the black page of

recollection. I know the awfulness of the god he had blasphemed; and the foulness of the demonolatry he had done, and the sense of guilt and despair under which he swooned. It is this that I have striven all my life to remember, this which I have been doomed to re-experience. And I fear with a great fear the further knowledge which a second experiment with the drug will reveal to me.

The next entry of Milwarp's diary begins with a strange dating in English script: 'The second day of the moon Occalat, in the thousand-and-ninth year of the Red Eon.' This dating, perhaps, is repeated in the language of Hestan: for, directly beneath it, a line of unknown ciphers is set apart. Several lines of the subsequent text are in the alien tongue; and then, as if by an unconscious reversion, Milwarp continues the diary in English. There is no reference to another experiment with *souvara*: but apparently such had been made, with a continued revival of his lost memories.

…What genius of the nadir gulf had tempted me to this thing and had caused me to overlook the consequences? Verily, when I called up for myself and Belthoris an hour of former autumn, with all that was attendant upon the hour, *that bygone interim was likewise evoked and repeated for the whole world Hestan, and the four suns of Hestan*. From the full midst of spring, all men had stepped backward into autumn, keeping only the memory of things prior to the hour thus resurrected, and knowing not the events future to the hour. But, returning to the present, they recalled with amazement the unnatural necromancy; and fear and bewilderment were upon them; and none could interpret the meaning.

For a brief period, the dead had lived again; the fallen leaves had returned to the bough; the heavenly bodies had stood at a long-abandoned station; the flower had gone back into the seed, the plant into the root. Then, with eternal disorder set among all its cycles, time had resumed its delayed course.

No movement of any cosmic body, no year or instant of the future, would be precisely as it should have been. The error and discrepancy I had wrought would bear fruit in ways innumerable. The suns would find themselves at fault; the worlds and atoms would go always a little astray from their appointed bourns.

It was of these matters that Atmox spoke, warning me, after he had staunched my bleeding wound. For he too, in that relumined hour, had gone back and had lived again through a past happening. For him the hour was one in which he had descended into the nether vaults of his house. There, standing in a many-pentacled circle, with burning of unholy incense and uttering of accurst formulae, he had called upon a malign spirit from the bowels of Hestan and had questioned it concerning the future. But the spirit, black and voluminous as the fumes of pitch, refused to answer him directly and pressed furiously with its clawed members against the confines of the circle. It said only: "Thou hast summoned me at thy peril. Potent are the spells thou hast used, and strong is the circle to withstand me, and I am restrained by time and space from the wreaking of my anger upon thee. *But haply thou shalt summon me again, albeit in the same hour of the same autumn*; and in that summoning the laws of time shall be broken, and a rift shall be made in space; and through the rift, though with some delay and divagation, I will yet win to thee."

Saying no more, it prowled restlessly about the circle; and its eyes burned down upon Atmox like embers in a highlifted sooty brazier; and ever and anon its fanged mouth was flattened on the spell-defended air. And in the end he could dismiss it only after a double repetition of the form of exorcism.

As he told me this tale in the garden, Atmox trembled; and his eyes searched the narrow shadows wrought by the high suns; and he seemed to listen for the noise of some evil thing that burrowed toward him beneath the earth.

Fourth day of the moon Occalat. Stricken with terrors beyond those of Atmox, I kept apart in my mansion amid the city of Kalood. I was still weak with the loss of blood I had yielded to Xexanoth; my senses were full of strange shadows; my servitors, coming and going about me, were as phantoms, and scarcely I heeded the pale fear in their eyes or heard the dreadful things they whispered.… Madness and chaos, they told me, were abroad in Kalood; the divinity of Aforgomon was angered. All men thought that some baleful doom impended because of

that unnatural confusion which had been wrought among the hours of time.

This afternoon they brought me the story of Atmox's death. In bated tones they told me how his neophytes had heard a roaring as of a loosed tempest in the chamber where he sat alone with his wizard volumes and paraphernalia. Above the roaring, for a little, human screams had sounded, together with a dashing as of hurled censers and braziers, a crashing as of overthrown tables and tomes. Blood rilled from under the shut door of the chamber, and, rilling, it took from instant to instant the form of dire ciphers that spelt an unspeakable name. After the noises had ceased, the neophytes waited a long while ere they dared to open the door. Entering at last, they saw the floor and the walls heavily bespattered with blood, and rags of the sorcerer's raiment mingled everywhere with the sheets of his torn volumes of magic, and the shreds and manglings of his flesh strewn amid broken furniture, and his brains daubed in a horrible paste on the high ceiling.

Hearing this tale, I knew that the earthly demon feared by Atmox had found him somehow and had wreaked its wrath upon him. In ways unguessable, it had reached him through the chasm made in ordered time and space by one hour repeated through necromancy. And because of that lawless chasm, the magician's power and lore had utterly failed to defend him from the demon.…

Fifth day of the moon Occalat. Atrnox, I am sure, had not betrayed me: for in so doing, he must have betrayed his own implicit share in my crime.… Howbeit, this evening the priests came to my house ere the setting of the westernmost sun: silent, grim, with eyes averted as if from a foulness innominable. Me, their fellow, they enjoined with loth gestures to accompany them.…

Thus they took me from my house and along the thoroughfares of Kalood toward the lowering suns. The streets were empty of all other passers, and it seemed that no man desired to meet or behold the blasphemer.…

Down the avenue of gnomon-shaped pillars, I was led to the portals of Aforgomon's fane: those awfully gaping portals arched in

the likeness of some devouring chimera's mouth.…

Sixth day of the moon Occalat. They had thrust me into an oubliette beneath the temple, dark, noisome and soundless except for the maddening, measured drip of water beside me. There I lay and knew not when the night passed and the morning came. Light was admitted only when my captors opened the iron door, coming to lead me before the tribunal…

…Thus the priests condemned me, speaking with one voice in whose dreadful volume the tones of all were indistinguishably blended. Then the aged high-priest Helpenor called aloud upon Aforgomon, offering himself as a mouthpiece to the god, and asking the god to pronounce through him the doom that was adequate for such enormities as those of which I had been judged guilty by my fellows.

Instantly, it seemed, the god descended into Helpenor; and the figure of the high-priest appeared to dilate prodigiously beneath his mufflings; and the accents that issued from his mouth were like thunders of the upper heaven:

"O Calaspa, thou hast set disorder amid all future hours and eons through this evil necromancy. Thereby, moreover, thou hast wrought thine own doom: fettered art thou for ever to the hour thus unlawfully repeated, apart from its due place in time. According to hieratic rule, thou shalt meet the death of the fiery chains: but deem not that this death is more than the symbol of thy true punishment. Thou shalt pass hereafter through other lives in Hestan, and shalt climb midway in the cycles of the world subsequent to Hestan in time and space. But through all thine incarnations the chaos thou hast invoked will attend thee widening ever like a rift. And always, in all thy lives, the rift will bar thee from reunion with the soul of Belthoris; and always, though merely by an hour, thou shalt miss the love that should otherwise have been oftentimes regained."

"At last, when the chasm has widened overmuch, thy soul shall fare no farther in the onward cycles of incarnation. At that time it shall be given thee to remember clearly thine ancient sin; and remembering, thou shalt perish out of time. Upon the body of that

latter life shall be found the charred imprint of the chains, as the final token of thy bondage. But they that knew thee will soon forget, and thou shalt belong wholly to the cycles limited for thee by thy sin."

March 29th. I write this date with infinite desperation, trying to convince myself that there is a John Milwarp who exists on Earth, in the Twentieth Century. For two days running, I have not taken the drug *souvara*: and yet I have returned twice to that oubliette of Aforgomon's temple, in which the priest Calaspa awaits his doom. Twice I have been immersed in its stagnant darkness, hearing the slow drip of water beside me, like a clepsydra that tells the black ages of the damned.

Even as I write this at my library table, it seems that an ancient midnight plucks at the lamp. The bookcases turn to walls of oozing, nighted stone. There is no longer a table…nor one who writes…and I breathe the noisome dankness of a dungeon lying unfathomed by any sun, in a lost world.

Eighteenth day of the moon Occalat. Today, for the last time, they took me from my prison. Helpenor, together with three others, came and led me to the adytum of the god. Far beneath the outer temple we went, through spacious crypts unknown to the common worshippers. There was no word spoken, no glance exchanged between the others and me; and it seemed that they already regarded me as one cast out from time and claimed by oblivion.

We came ultimately to that sheer-falling gulf in which the spirit of Aforgomon is said to dwell. Lights, feeble and far-scattered, shone around it like stars on the rim of cosmic vastness, shedding no ray into the depths. There, in a seat of hewn stone overhanging the frightful verge, I was placed by the executioners; and a ponderous chain of black unrusted metal, stapled to the solid rock, was wound about and about me, circling my naked body and separate limbs, from head to foot.

To this doom, others had been condemned for heresy or impiety… though never for a sin such as mine. After the chaining of the victim, he was left for a stated interim, to ponder his crime—and haply to confront the dark divinity of Aforgomon. At length, from the abyss

into which his position forced him to peer, a light would dawn, and a bolt of strange flame would leap upward, striking the many coiled chain about him and heating it instantly to the whiteness of candescent iron. The source and nature of the flame were mysterious, and many ascribed it to the god himself rather than to mortal agency.…

Even thus they have left me, and have gone away. Long since the burden of the massy links, cutting deeper and deeper into my flesh, has become an agony. I am dizzy from gazing downward into the abyss—and yet I cannot fall. Beneath, immeasurably beneath, at recurrent intervals, I hear a hollow and solemn sound. Perhaps it is the sigh of sunken waters…of cavern-straying winds…or the respiration of One that abides in the darkness, meting with his breath the slow minutes, the hours, the days, the ages.… My terror has become heavier than the chain, my vertigo is born of a two-fold gulf.…

Eons have passed by and all the worlds have ebbed into nothingness, like wreckage borne on a chasm-falling stream, taking with them the lost face of Belthoris. I am poised above the gaping maw of the Shadow.… Somehow, in another world, an exile phantom has written these words…a phantom who must fade utterly from time and place, even as I, the doomed priest Calaspa. I cannot remember the name of the phantom.

Beneath me, in the black depths, there is an awful brightening…

THE BLACK ABBOT OF PUTHUUM

***Weird Tales*, March 1936.**

Let the grape yield for us its purple flame,
And rosy love put off its maidenhood:
By blackening moons, in lands without a name,
We slew the Incubus and all his brood.

—Song of King Hoaraph's Bowmen

Zobal the archer and Cushara the pikebearer had poured many a libation to their friendship in the sanguine liquors of Yoros and the blood of the kingdom's enemies. In that long and lusty amity, broken only by such passing quarrels as concerned the division of a wine-skin or the apportioning of a wench, they had served amid the soldiery of King Hoaraph for a strenuous decade. Savage warfare and wild, fantastic hazard had been their lot. The renown of their valor had drawn upon them, ultimately, the honor of Hoaraph's attention, and he had assigned them for duty among the picked warriors that guarded his palace in Faraad. And sometimes the twain were sent together on such missions as required no common hardihood and no disputable fealty to the king.

Now, in company with the eunuch Simban, chief purveyor to Hoaraph's well-replenished harem, Zobal and Cushara had gone on a tedious journey through the tract known as Izdrel, which clove the western part of Yoros asunder with its rusty-colored wedge of desolation. The king had sent them to learn if haply there abode any verity in certain travelers' tales, which concerned a young maiden of celestial beauty who had been seen among the pastoral peoples beyond Izdrel. Simban bore at his girdle a bag of gold coins with which, if the girl's pulchritude should be in any wise commensurate with the renown thereof, he was empowered to bargain for her purchase. The king had deemed that Zobal and Cushara should form an escort equal to all contingencies: for Izdrel was a land reputedly free of robbers, or, indeed, of any human inhabitants. Men said, however, that malign goblins, tall as giants and humped like camels, had oftentimes beset the wayfarers through Izdrel, that fair but ill-meaning lamiae had lured

them to an eldritch death. Simban, quaking corpulently in his saddle, rode with small willingness on that outward journey; but the archer and the pike bearer, full of wholesome skepticism, divided their bawdy jests between the timid eunuch and the elusive demons.

Without other mishap than the rupturing of a wine-skin from the force of the new vintage it contained, they came to the verdurous pasture-lands beyond that dreary desert. Here, in low valleys that held the middle meanderings of the river Vos, cattle and dromedaries were kept by a tribe of herders who sent biannual tribute to Hoaraph from their teeming droves. Simban and his companions found the girl, who dwelt with her grandmother in a village beside the Vos; and even the eunuch acknowledged that their journey was well rewarded.

Cushara and Zobal, on their part, were instantly smitten by the charms of the maiden, whose name was Rubalsa. She was slender and of queenly height, and her skin was pale as the petals of white poppies; and the undulant blackness of her heavy hair was full of sullen copper gleamings beneath the sun. While Simban haggled shrilly with the cronelike grandmother, the warriors eyed Rubalsa with circumspect ardor and addressed to her such gallantries as they deemed discreet within hearing of the eunuch.

At last the bargain was driven and the price paid, to the sore depletion of Simban's moneybag. Simban was now eager to return to Faraad with his prize, and he seemed to have forgotten his fear of the haunted desert. Zobal and Cushara were routed from their dreams by the impatient eunuch before dawn; and the three departed with the still drowsy Rubalsa ere the village could awaken about them.

Noon, with its sun of candent copper in a blackish-blue zenith, found them far amid the rusty sands and iron-toothed ridges of Izdrel. The route they followed was little more than a footpath: for, though Izdrel was but thirty miles in width at that point, few travelers would dare those fiend-infested leagues; and most preferred an immensely circuitous road, used by the herders, that ran to the southward of that evil desolation, following the Vos nearly to its debouchment in the Indaskian Sea.

Cushara, splendid in his plate-armor of bronze, on a huge piebald mare with a cataphract of leather scaled with copper, led the cavalcade. Rubalsa, who wore the red homespun of the herders' women, followed on a black

gelding with silk and silver harness, which Hoaraph had sent for her use. Close behind her came the watchful eunuch, gorgeous in particolored sendal, and mounted ponderously, with swollen saddlebags all about him, on the gray ass of uncertain age which, through his fear of horses and camels, he insisted on riding at all times. In his hand he held the leading-rope of another ass which was nearly crushed to the ground by the wine-skins, water-jugs and other provisions. Zobal guarded the rear, with unslung bow, slim and wiry in his suiting of light chain mail, on a nervous stallion that chafed incessantly at the rein. At his back he bore a quiver filled with arrows which the court sorcerer, Amdok, had prepared with singular spells and dippings in doubtful fluids, for his possible use against demons. Zobal had accepted the arrows courteously but had satisfied himself later that their iron barbs were in no wise impaired by Amdok's treatment. A similarly ensorceled pike had been offered by Amdok to Cushara, who had refused it bluffly, saying that his own well-tried weapon was equal to the spitting of any number of devils.

Because of Simban and the two asses, the party could make little speed. However, they hoped to cross the wilder and more desolate portion of Izdrel ere night. Simban, though he still eyed the dismal waste dubiously, was plainly more concerned with his precious charge than with the imagined imps and lamiae. And Cushara and Zobal, both rapt in amorous reveries that centered about the luscious Rubalsa, gave only a perfunctory attention to their surroundings.

The girl had ridden all morning in demure silence. Now, suddenly, she cried out in a voice whose sweetness was made shrill by alarm. The others reined their mounts, and Simban babbled questions. To these Rubalsa replied by pointing toward the southern horizon, where, as her companions now saw, a peculiar pitch-black darkness had covered a great portion of the sky and hills, obliterating them wholly. This darkness, which seemed due neither to cloud nor sandstorm, extended itself in a crescent on either hand, and came swiftly toward the travelers. In the course of a minute or less, it had blotted the pathway before and behind them like a black mist; and the two arcs of shadow, racing northward, had flowed together, immuring the party in a circle. The darkness then became stationary, its walls no more than a hundred feet away on every side. Sheer, impenetrable, it surrounded the wayfarers, leaving above them a clear space from which the sun still

glared down, remote and small and discolored, as if seen from the bottom of a deep pit.

"Ai! Ai! Ai!" howled Simban, cowering amid his saddlebags. "I knew well that some devilry would overtake us."

At the same moment the two asses began to bray loudly, and the horses, with a frantic neighing and squealing, trembled beneath their riders. Only with much cruel spurring could Zobal force his stallion forward beside Cushara's mare.

"Mayhap it is only some pestilential mist," said Cushara.

"Never have I seen such mist," replied Zobal doubtfully. "And there are no vapors to be met with in Izdrel. Methinks it is like the smoke of the seven hells that men fable beneath Zothique."

"Shall we ride forward?" said Cushara. "I would learn whether or not a pike can penetrate that darkness."

Calling out some words of reassurance to Rubalsa, the twain sought to spur their mounts toward the murky wall. But, after a few swerving paces, the mare and the stallion balked wildly, sweating and snorting, and would go no farther. Cushara and Zobal dismounted and continued their advance on foot.

Not knowing the source or nature of the phenomenon with which they had to deal, the two approached it warily. Zobal nocked an arrow to his string, and Cushara held the great bronze-headed pike before him as if charging an embattled foe. Both were more and more puzzled by the murkiness, which did not recede before them in the fashion of fog, but maintained its opacity when they were close upon it.

Cushara was about to thrust his weapon into the wall. Then, without the least prelude, there arose in the darkness, seemingly just before him, a horrible, multitudinous clamor as of drums, trumpets, cymbals, jangling armor, jarring voices, and mailed feet that tramped to and fro on the stony ground with a mighty clangor. As Cushara and Zobal drew back in amazement, the clamor swelled and spread, till it filled with a babel of warlike noises the whole circle of mysterious night that hemmed in the travelers.

"VeriIy, we are sore beset," shouted Cushara to his comrade as they went back to their horses. "It would seem that some king of the north has sent his myrmidons into Yoros."

“Yea,” said Zobal. “But it is strange that we saw them not ere the darkness came. And the darkness, surely, is no natural thing.”

Before Cushara could make any rejoinder, the martial clashings and shoutings ceased abruptly. All about it seemed that there was a rattling of innumerable sistra, a hissing of countless huge serpents, a raucous hooting of ill-omened birds that had foregathered by thousands. To these indescribably hideous sounds, the horses now added a continual screaming, and the asses a more frenzied braying, above which the outcries of Rubalsa and Simban were scarce audible.

Cushara and Zobal sought vainly to pacify their mounts and comfort the madly frightened girl. It was plain that no army of mortal men had beleaguered them: for the noises still changed from instant to instant, and they heard a most evil howling, and a roaring as of hellborn beasts that deafened them with its volume.

Naught, however, was visible in the gloom, whose circle now began to move swiftly, without widening or contracting. To maintain their position in its center, the warriors and their charges were compelled to leave the path and to flee northwardly amid the harsh ridges and hollows. All around them the baleful noises continued, keeping, as it seemed, the same interval of distance.

The sun, slanting westward, no longer shone into that eerily moving pit, and a deep twilight enveloped the wanderers. Zobal and Cushara rode as closely beside Rubalsa as the rough ground permitted, straining their eyes constantly for any visible sign of the cohorts that seemed to encompass them. Both were filled with the darkest misgivings, for it had become all too manifest that supernatural powers were driving them astray in the untracked desert.

Moment by moment the gross darkness seemed to close in; and there was a palpable eddying and seething as of monstrous forms behind its curtain. The horses stumbled over boulders and outcroppings of ore-sharp stone, and the grievously burdened asses were compelled to put forth an unheard-of speed to keep pace with the ever-shifting circle that menaced them with its horrid clamor. Rubalsa had ceased her outcries, as if overcome by exhaustion or resignation to the horror of her plight; and the shrill screeches of the eunuch had subsided into fearful wheezing and gasping.

Ever and anon, it seemed that great fiery eyes glared out of the gloom, floating close to earth or moving aloft at a gigantic height. Zobal began to shoot his enchanted arrows at these appearance, and the speeding of each bolt was hailed by an appalling outburst of Satanic laughters and ululations.

In such wise they went on, losing all measure of time and sense of orientation. The animals were galled and footsore. Simban was nigh dead from fright and fatigue; Rubalsa drooped in her saddle; and the warriors, awed and baffled by the predicament in which their weapons appeared useless, began to flag with a dull weariness.

"Never again shall I doubt the legendry of Izdrel," said Cushara gloomily.

"It is in my mind that we have not long either to doubt or believe," rejoined Zobal.

To add to their distress, the terrain grew rougher and steeper, and they climbed acclivitous hillsides and went down endlessly into drear valleys. Anon they came to a flat, open, pebbly space. There, all at once, it seemed that the pandemonium of evil noises drew back on every hand, receding and fading into faint, dubious whispers that died at a vast remove. Simultaneously, the circling night thinned out, and a few stars shone in the welkin, and the sharp-spined hills of the desert loomed starkly against a vermilion afterglow. The travelers paused and peered wonderingly at one another in a gloom that was no more than that of natural twilight.

"What new devilry is this?" asked Cushara, hardly daring to believe that the hellish leaguers had vanished.

"I know not," said the archer, who was staring into the dusk. "But here, mayhap, is one of the devils."

The others now saw that a muffled figure was approaching them, bearing a lit lantern made of some kind of translucent horn. At some distance behind the figure, lights appeared suddenly in a square dark mass which none of the party had discerned before. This mass was evidently a large building with many windows.

The figure, drawing near, was revealed by the dim yellowish lantern as a black man of immense girth and tallness, garbed in a voluminous robe of saffron such as was worn by certain monkish orders, and crowned with the two-horned purple hat of an abbot. He was indeed a singular and unlooked-for apparition: for if any monasteries existed amid the barren reaches of

Izdrel, they were hidden and unknown to the world. Zobal, however, searching his memory, recalled a vague tradition he had once heard concerning a chapter of negro monks that had flourished in Yoros many centuries ago. The chapter had long been extinct, and the very site of its monastery was forgotten. Nowadays there were few blacks anywhere in the kingdom, other than those who did duty as eunuchs guarding the seraglios of nobles and rich merchants.

The animals began to display a certain uneasiness at the stranger's approach.

"Who art thou?" challenged Cushara, his fingers tightening on the haft of his weapon.

The black man grinned capaciously, showing rows of discolored teeth whose incisors were like those of a wild dog. His enormous unctuous jowls were creased by the grin into folds of amazing number and volume; and his eyes, deeply slanted and close together, seemed to wink perpetually in pouches that shook like ebon jellies. His nostrils flared prodigiously; his purple, rubbery lips drooled and quivered, and he licked them with a fat, red, salacious tongue before replying to Cushara's question.

"I am Ujuk, abbot of the monastery of Puthuum," he said, in a thick voice of such extraordinary volume that it appeared almost to issue from the earth under his feet. "Methinks the night has overtaken you far from the route of travelers. I bid you welcome to our hospitality."

"Aye, the night took us betimes," Cushara returned dryly. Neither he nor Zobal was reassured by the look of lust in the abbot's obscenely twinkling eyes as he peered at Rubalsa. Moreover, they had now noted the excessive and disagreeable length of the dark nails on his huge hands and bare, splayed feet: nails that were curving, three-inch talons, sharp as those of some beast or bird of prey.

It seemed, however, that Rubalsa and Simban were less abhorrently impressed, or had not noticed these details: for both made haste to acknowledge the abbot's proffer of hospitality and to urge acceptance upon the visibly reluctant warriors. To this urging, Zobal and Cushara yielded, both inwardly resolving to keep a close watch on all the actions and movements of the abbot of Puthuum.

Ujuk, holding the horn lantern aloft, conducted the travelers to that massive building whose lights they had discerned at no great distance. A

ponderous gate of dark wood swung open silently at their approach, and they entered a spacious courtyard cobbled with worn, greasy-looking stones, and dimly illumined by torches in rusty iron sockets. Several monks appeared with startling suddenness before the travelers, who had thought the courtyard vacant at first glance. They were all of unusual bulk and stature, and their features possessed an extraordinary likeness to those of Ujuk, from whom, indeed, they could hardly have been distinguished save by the yellow cowls which they wore in lieu of the abbot's horned purple hat. The similarity extended even to their curved and talon-like nails of inordinate length. Their movements were fantasmally furtive and silent. Without speaking, they took charge of the horses and asses. Cushara and Zobal relinquished their mounts to the care of these doubtful hostlers with a reluctance which, apparently, was not shared by Rubalsa or the eunuch.

The monks also signified a willingness to relieve Cushara of his heavy pike and Zobal of his ironwood bow and half-emptied quiver of ensorceled arrows. But at this the warriors balked, refusing to let the weapons pass from their possession.

Ujuk led them to an inner portal which gave admission to the refectory. It was a large, low room, lit by brazen lamps of antique workmanship, such as ghouls might have recovered from a desert-sunken tomb. The abbot, with ogre-like grinnings, besought his guests to take their place at a long massive table of ebony with chairs and benches of the same material.

When they had seated themselves, Ujuk sat down at the table's head. Immediately, four monks came in, bearing platters piled with spicily smoking viands, and deep earthen flagons full of a dark amber-brown liquor. And these monks, like those encountered in the courtyard, were gross ebon-black simulacra of their abbot, resembling him precisely in every feature and member. Zobal and Cushara were chary of tasting the liquor, which, for its odor, appeared to be an exceptionally potent kind of ale: for their doubts concerning Ujuk and his monastery grew graver every moment. Also, in spite of their hunger, they refrained from the food set before them, which consisted mainly of baked meats that neither could identify. Simban and Rubalsa, however, addressed themselves promptly to the meal with appetites sharpened by long fasting and the weird fatigues of the day.

The warriors observed that neither food nor drink had been placed before Ujuk, and they conjectured that he had already dined. To their growing disgust and anger, he sat lolling obesely, with lustful eyes upon Rubalsa in a stare broken only by the nictitations that accompanied his perpetual grinning. This stare soon began to abash the girl, and then to alarm and frighten her. She ceased eating; and Simban, who had been deeply preoccupied till then with his supper, was plainly perturbed when he saw the flagging of her appetite. He seemed for the first time to notice the abbot's unmonastic leering, and showed his disapproval by sundry horrible grimaces. He also remarked pointedly, in a loud, piercing voice, that the girl was destined for the harem of King Hoaraph. But at this, Ujuk merely chuckled, as if Simban had uttered some exquisitely humorous jest.

Zobal and Cushara were hard put to repress their wrath, and both itched hotly for the fleshing of their weapons in the abbot's gross bulk. He, however, seemed to have taken Simban's hint, for he shifted his gaze from the girl. Instead, he began to eye the warriors with a curious and loathsome avidity, which they found little less insupportable than his ogling of Rubalsa. The well-nourished eunuch also came in for his share of Ujuk's regard which seemed to have in it the hunger of a hyena gloating over his prospective prey.

Simban, obviously ill at ease, and somewhat frightened, now tried to carry on a conversation with the abbot, volunteering much information as to himself, his companions, and the adventures which had brought them to Puthuum. Ujuk seemed little surprised by this information; and Zobal and Cushara, who took no part in the conversation, became surer than ever that he was no true abbot.

"How far have we gone astray from the route to Faraad?" asked Simban.

"I do not consider that you have gone astray," rumbled Ujuk in his subterranean voice, "for your coming to Puthuum is most timely. We have few guests here, and we are loth to part with those who honor our hospitality."

"King Hoaraph will be impatient for our return with the girl," Simban quavered. "We must depart early tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is another matter," said Ujuk, in a tone half unctuous, half sinister. "Perhaps, by then, you will have forgotten this deplorable haste."

Little was said during the rest of the meal; and, indeed, little was drunk or eaten; for even Simban seemed to have lost his normally voracious appetite. Ujuk, still grinning as if at some uproarious jest known only to himself, was apparently not concerned with the urging of food upon his guests.

Certain of the monks came and went unbidden, removing the laden dishes, and as they departed, Zobal and Cushara perceived a strange thing: for no shadows were cast by the monks on the lamplit floor beside the moving adumbrations of the vessels they carried! From Ujuk, however, a heavy, misshapen umbrage fell and lay like a prone incubus beside his chair.

"Methinks we have come to a hatching place of demons," whispered Zobal to Cushara. "We have fought many men, thou and I, but never such as wanted wholesome shadows."

"Aye," muttered the pike-bearer. "But I like this abbot even less than his monks: though he alone is the caster of a shade."

Ujuk now rose from his seat, saying: "I trow that ye are all weary and would sleep betimes."

Rubalsa and Simban, who had both drunk a certain amount of the powerful ale of Puthuum, nodded a drowsy assent. Zobal and Cushara, noting their premature sleepiness, were glad they had declined the liquor.

The abbot led his guests along a corridor whose gloom was but little relieved by the flaring of torches in a strong draft that blew stealthily from an undetermined source, causing a rout of wild shadows to flitter beside the passers. On either hand there were cells with portals shut only by hangings of a coarse hempen fabric. The monks had all vanished, the cells were seemingly dark, and an air of age-old desolation pervaded the monastery, together with a smell as of moldering bones piled in some secret catacomb.

Midway in the hall, Ujuk paused and held aside the arras of a doorway that differed in no wise from the rest. Within, a lamp burned, depending from an archaic chain of curiously linked and fretted metal. The room was bare but spacious, and a bed of ebony with opulent quiltings of an olden fashion stood by the farther wall under an open window. This chamber, the abbot indicated, was for the occupancy of Rubalsa; and he then offered to show the men and the eunuch their respective quarters.

Simban, seeming to wake all at once from his drowsiness, protested at the idea of being separated in such wise from his charge. As if Ujuk had been prepared for this, and had given orders accordingly, a monk appeared forthwith, bringing quilts which he laid on the flagged floor within the portals of Rubalsa's room. Simban stretched himself promptly on the improvised bed, and the warriors withdrew with Ujuk.

"Come," said the abbot, his wolfish teeth gleaming in the torchlight. "Ye will sleep soundly in the beds I have prepared."

Zobal and Cushara, however, had now assumed the position of guardsmen outside the doorway of Rubalsa's chamber. They told Ujuk curtly that they were responsible to King Hoaraph for the girl's safety and must watch over her at all times.

"I wish ye a pleasant vigil," said Ujuk, with a cachinnation like the laughter of hyenas in some underground tomb.

With his departure, it seemed that the black slumber of a dead antiquity settled upon all the building. Rubalsa and Simban, apparently, slept without stirring, for there was no sound from behind the hempen arras. The warriors spoke only in whispers, lest they should arouse the girl. Their weapons held ready for instant use, they watched the shadowy hall with a jealous vigilance: for they did not trust the quietude about them, being well assured that a host of foul cacodemons couched somewhere behind it, biding the time of assault.

Howbeit, nothing occurred to reconfirm them in such apprehensions. The draft that breathed furtively along the hall seemed to tell only of age-forgotten death and cyclic solitude. The two began to perceive signs of dilapidation in walls and floor that had heretofore escaped their notice. Eery, fantastical thoughts came to them with insidious persuasion: it seemed that the building was a ruin that had lain uninhabited for a thousand years; that the black abbot Ujuk and his shadowless monks were mere imaginations, things that had never been; that the moving circle of darkness, the pandemonian voices, that had herded them toward Puthuum, were no more than a daymare whose memory was now fading in the fashion of dreams.

Thirst and hunger troubled them, for they had not eaten since early morn, and had snatched only a few hasty drafts of wine or water during the day. Both, however, began to feel the oncreeping of a sleepy hebetude which,

under the circumstances, was most undesirable. They nodded, started and awoke recurrently to their peril. But still, like a siren voice in poppy-dreams, the silence seemed to tell them that all danger was a bygone thing, an illusion that belonged to yesterday.

Several hours passed, and the hall lightened with the rising of a late moon that shone through a window at its eastern end. Zobal, less bedrowsed than Cushara, was awakened to full awareness by a sudden commotion among the animals in the courtyard without. There were neighings that rose to a frenzied pitch, as if something had frightened the horses; and to these the asses began to add their heavy braying, till Cushara was also aroused.

"Make sure that thou drowsest not again," Zobal admonished the pike-bearer. "I shall go forth and inquire as to the cause of this tumult."

"Tis a good thought," commended Cushara. "And while thou art gone, see to it that none has molested our provisions. And bring back with thee some apricots and cakes of sesame and a skin of ruby-red wine."

The monastery itself remained silent as Zobal went down the hall, his buskins of link-covered leather ringing faintly. At the hall's end an outer door stood open, and he passed through it into the courtyard. Even as he, emerged, the animals ceased their clamor. He could see but dimly, for all the torches in the courtyard, save one, had burnt out or been extinguished; and the low gibbous moon had not yet climbed the wall. Nothing, to all appearance, was amiss: the two asses were standing quietly beside the mountainous piles of provisions and saddlebags they had borne; the horses seemed to drowse amicably in a group. Zobal decided that perhaps there had been some temporary bickering between his stallion and Cushara's mare.

He went forward to make sure that there was no other cause of disturbance. Afterward he turned to the wineskins, intending to refresh himself before rejoining Cushara with a supply of drinkables and comestibles. Hardly had he washed the dust of Izdrel from his throat with a long draft, when he heard an eery, dry whispering whose source and distance he could not at once determine. Sometimes it seemed at his very ear, and then it ebbed away as if sinking into profound subterranean vaults. But the sound, though variable in this manner, never ceased entirely; and it seemed to shape itself into words that the listener almost understood: words

that were fraught with the hopeless sorrow of a dead man who had sinned long ago, and had repented his sin through black sepulchral ages.

As he harkened to the sere anguish of that sound, the hair bristled on the archer's neck, and he knew such fear as he had never known in the thick of battle. And yet, at the same time, he was aware of deeper pity than the pain of dying comrades had ever aroused in his heart. And it seemed that the voice implored him for commiseration and succor, laying upon him a weird compulsion that he dared not disobey. He could not wholly comprehend the things that the whisperer besought him to do: but somehow he must ease that desolate anguish.

Still the whispering rose and fell; and Zobal forgot that he had left Cushara to a lone vigil beset with hellish dangers; forgot that the voice itself might well be only a device of demons to lure him astray. He began to search the courtyard, his keen ears alert for the source of the sound; and, after some dubitation, he decided that it issued from the ground in a corner opposite the gateway. Here, amid the cobbling, in the wall's angle, he found a large slab of syenite with a rusty metal ring in its center. He was quickly confirmed in his decision: for the whispering became louder and more articulate, and he thought that it said to him: "Lift the slab."

The archer grasped the rusty ring with both hands, and putting forth all his strength, he succeeded in tilting back the stone, albeit not without such exertion as made him feel that his very spine would crack. A dark opening was exposed, and from it surged a charnel stench so overpowering that Zobal turned his face away and was like to have vomited. But the whisper came with a sharp, woeful beseeching, out of the darkness below; and it said to him: "Descend."

Zobal wrenched from its socket the one torch that still burned in the courtyard. By its lurid flaring he saw a flight of worn steps that went down into the reeking sepulchral gloom; and resolutely he descended the steps, finding himself at their bottom in a hewn vault with deep shelves of stone on either hand. The shelves, running away into darkness, were piled with human bones and mummified bodies; and plainly the place was the catacomb of the monastery.

The whispering had ceased, and Zobal peered about in bewilderment not unmixed with horror.

“I am here,” resumed the dry, susurrous voice, issuing from amid the heaps of mortal remnants on the shelf close beside him. Startled, and feeling again that crisping of the hairs on his neck, Zobal held his torch to the low shelf as he looked for the speaker. In a narrow niche between stacks of disarticulated bones, he beheld a half-decayed corpse about whose long, attenuate limbs and hollow body there hung a few rotten shreds of yellow cloth. These, he thought, were the remnants of a robe such as was worn by the monks of Puthuum. Then, thrusting his torch into the niche, he discerned the lean, mummy-like head, on which moldered a thing that had once been the horned hat of an abbot. The corpse was black as ebony, and plainly it was that of a great negro. It bore an aspect of incredible age, as if it had lain there for centuries: but from it came the odor of newly ripe corruption that had sickened Zobal when he lifted the slab of syenite.

As he stood staring down, it seemed to Zobal that the cadaver stirred a little, as if fain to rise from its recumbent posture; and he saw a gleaming as of eyeballs in the deepshadowed sockets; and the dolorously curling lips were retracted still farther; and from between the bared teeth there issued that awful whispering which had drawn him into the catacomb.

“Listen closely,” said the whispering. “There is much for me to tell thee, and much for thee to do when the telling is done.

“I am Uldor, the abbot of Puthuum. More than a thousand years ago I came with my monks to Yoros from Ilcar, the black empire of the north. The emperor of Ilcar had driven us forth, for our cult of celibacy, our worship of the maiden goddess Ojhal, were hateful to him. Here amid the desert of Izdrel we built our monastery and dwelt unmolested.

“We were many in number at first; but the years went by, and one by one the Brothers were laid in the catacomb we had delved for our resting place. They died with none to replace them. I alone survived in the end: for I had won such sanctity as ensures longevous days, and had also become a master of the arts of sorcery. Time was a demon that I held at bay, like one who stands in a charmed circle. My powers were still hale and unimpaired; and I lived on as an anchorite in the monastery.

“At first the solitude was far from irksome to me, and I was wholly absorbed in my study of the arcana of nature. But after a time it seemed that such things no longer satisfied. I grew aware of my loneliness, and was much beset by the demons of the waste, who had troubled me little

heretofore. Succubi, fair but baneful, lamiae with the round soft bodies of women, came to tempt me in the drear vigils of the night.

"I resisted… But there was one she-devil, more cunning than the others, who crept into my cell in the semblance of a girl I had loved long ago, ere yet I had taken the vow of Ojhal. To her I succumbed; and of the unholy union was born the half-human fiend, Ujuk, who has since called himself the abbot of Puthuum.

"After that sin, I wished to die… And the wish was manifoldly strengthened when I beheld the progeny of the sin. Too greatly, however, had I offended Ojhal; and a frightful penance was decreed for me. I lived… and daily I was plagued and persecuted by the monster, Ujuk, who grew lustily in the manner of such offspring. But when Ujuk had gained his full stature, there came upon me such weakness and decrepitude as made me hopeful of death. Scarce could I stir in my impotence, and Ujuk, taking advantage of this, bore me in his horrid arms to the catacomb and laid me among the dead. Here I have remained ever since, dying and rotting eternally—and yet eternally alive. For almost a millennium I have suffered unsleepingly the dire anguish of repentance that brings no expiation."

"Through the powers of saintly and sorcerous vision that never left me, I was doomed to watch the foul deeds, the hell-dark iniquities of Ujuk. Wearing the guise of an abbot, endowed with strange infernal powers together with a kind of immortality, he has presided over Puthuum through the centuries. His enchantments have kept the monastery hidden…save from those that he wishes to draw within reach of his ghoulish hunger, his incubus-like desires. Men he devours; and women are made to serve his lust… And still I am condemned to see his turpitudes; and the seeing is my most grievous punishment."

The whisper sank away; and Zobal, who had listened in eldritch awe, as one who hears the speech of a dead man, was doubtful for a moment that Uldor still lived. Then the sere voice went on:

"Archer, I crave a boon from thee; and I offer in return a thing that will aid thee against Ujuk. In thy quiver thou bearest charmed arrows: and the wizardry of him that wrought them was good. Such arrows can slay the else-immortal powers of evil. They can slay Ujuk—and even such evil as endures in me and forbids me to die. Archer, grant me an arrow through the heart: and if that suffice not, an arrow through the right eye, and one

through the left. And leave the arrows in their mark, for I deem that thou canst well spare so many. One alone is needed for Ujuk. As to the monks thou hast seen, I will tell thee a secret. They are twelve in number, but…"

Zobal would scarcely have believed the thing that Uldor now unfolded, if the events of the day had not left him beyond all incredulity. The abbot continued:

"When I am wholly dead, take thou the talisman which depends about my neck. The talisman is a touchstone that will dissolve such ill enchantments as have a material seeming, if applied thereto with the hand."

For the first time, Zobal perceived the talisman, which was an oval of plain gray stone lying upon Uldor's withered bosom on a chain of black silver.

"Make haste, O archer," the whispering implored.

Zobal had socketed his torch in the pile of moldering bones beside Uldor. With a sense of mingled compulsion and reluctance, he drew an arrow from his quiver, notched it, and aimed unflinchingly down at Uldor's heart. The shaft went straightly and deeply into its mark; and Zobal waited. But anon from the retracted lips of the black abbot there issued a faint murmuring: "Archer, another arrow!"

Again the bow was drawn, and a shaft sped unerringly into the hollow orbit of Uldor's right eye. And again, after an interval, there came the almost inaudible pleading: "Archer, still another shaft."

Once more the bow of ironwood sang in the silent vault, and an arrow stood in the left eye of Uldar, quivering with the force of its propulsion. This time there was no whisper from the rotting lips: but Zobal heard a curious rustling, and a sigh as of lapsing sand. Beneath his gaze the black limbs and body crumbled swiftly, the face and head fell in, and the three arrows sagged awry, since there was naught now but a pile of dust and parting bones to hold them embedded.

Leaving the arrows as Uldor had enjoined him to do, Zobal groped for the gray talisman that was now buried amid those fallen relics. Finding it, he hung it carefully at his belt beside the long straight sword which he carried. Perhaps, he reflected, the thing might have its use ere the night was over.

Quickly he turned away and climbed the steps to the courtyard. A saffron-yellow and lopsided moon was soaring above the wall, and he knew

by this that he had been absent overlong from his vigil with Cushara. All, however, seemed tranquil: the drowsing animals had not stirred; and the monastery was dark and soundless. Seizing a full wine-skin and a bag containing such edibles as Cushara had asked him to bring, Zobal hurried back to the open hall.

Even as he passed into the building, the arras-like silence before him was burst asunder by a frightful hubbub. He distinguished amid the clamor the screaming of Rubalsa, the screeching of Simban, and the furious roaring of Cushara: but above these, as if to drown them all, an obscene laughter mounted continually, like the welling forth of dark subterrene waters thick and foul with the fats of corruption.

Zobal dropped the wine-skin and the sack of comestibles and raced forward, unslinging his bow as he went. The outcries of his companions continued, but he heard them faintly now above the damnable incubus-like laughter that swelled as if to fill the whole monastery. As he neared the space before Rubalsa's chamber, he saw Cushara beating with the haft of his pike at a blank wall in which there was no longer a hempen-curtained doorway. Behind the wall the screeching of Simban ceased in a gurgling moan like that of some butchered steer; but the girl's terror-sharpened cries still mounted through the smothering cachinnation.

"This wall was wrought by demons," raged the pike bearer as he smote vainly at the smooth masonry. "I kept a faithful watch—but they built it behind me in a silence as of the dead. And a fouler work is being done in that chamber."

"Master thy frenzy," said Zobal, as he strove to regain the command of his own faculties amid the madness that threatened to overwhelm him. At that instant he recalled the oval gray touchstone of Uldor, which hung at his baldric from its black silver chain; and it came to him that the closed wall was perhaps an unreal enchantment against which the talisman might serve even as Uldor had said.

Quickly he took the touchstone in his fingers and held it to the blank surface where the doorway had been. Cushara looked on with an air of stupefaction, as if deeming the archer demented. But even as the talisman clicked faintly against it, the wall seemed to dissolve, leaving only a rude arras that fell away in tatters as if it too had been no more than a sorcerous illusion. The strange disintegration continued to spread, the whole partition

melted away to a few worn blocks, and the gibbous moon shone in as the abbey of Puthuum crumbled silently to a gapped and roofless ruin!

All this had occurred in a few moments; but the warriors found no room for wonder. By the livid light of the moon, which peered down like the face of a worm-gnawed cadaver, they looked upon a scene so hideous that it caused them to forget all else. Before them, on a cracked floor from whose interstices grew desert grasses, the eunuch Simban lay sprawled in death. His raiment was torn to streamers, and blood bubbled darkly from his mangled throat. Even the leather pouches which he bore at his girdle had been ripped open, and gold coins, vials of medicine and other oddments were scattered around him.

Beyond, by the half-crumbled outer wall, Rubalsa lay in a litter of rotted cloth and woodwork which had been the gorgeously quilted ebon bed. She was trying to fend off with her lifted hands the enormously swollen shape that hung horizontally above her, as if levitated by the floating wing-like folds of its saffron robe. This shape the warriors recognized as the abbot Ujuk.

The overwelling laughter of the black incubus had ceased, and he turned upon the intruders a face contorted by diabolic lust and fury. His teeth clashed audibly, his eyes glowed in their pouches like beads of red-hot metal, as he withdrew from his position over the girl and loomed monstrously erect before her amid the ruins of the chamber.

Cushara rushed forward with leveled pike ere Zobal could fit one of his arrows to the string. But even as the pike-bearer crossed the sill, it seemed that the foully bloated form of Ujuk multiplied itself in a dozen yellow-garmented shapes that surged to meet Cushara's onset. Appearing as if by some hellish legerdemain, the monks of Puthuum had mustered to assist their abbot.

Zobal cried out in warning, but the shapes were all about Cushara, dodging the thrusts of his weapon and clawing ferociously at his plate-armor with their terrific three-inch talons. Valiantly he fought them, only to go down after a little and disappear from sight as if whelmed by a pack of ravening hyenas.

Remembering the scarce credible thing that Uldor had told him, Zobal wasted no arrows upon the monks. His bow ready, he waited for full sight of Ujuk beyond the seething rout that mangled malignantly back and forth

above the fallen pike-bearer. In an eddying of the pack he aimed swiftly at the looming incubus, who seemed wholly intent on that fiendish struggle, as if directing it in some wise without spoken word or ponderable gesture. Straight and true the arrow sped with an exultant singing; and good was the sorcery of Amdok, who had wrought it: for Ujuk reeled and went down, his horrid fingers tearing vainly at the shaft that was driven nigh to its fledging of eagle-quills in his body.

Now a strange thing occurred: for, as the incubus fell and writhed to and fro in his dying, the twelve monks all dropped away from Cushara, tossing convulsively on the floor as if they were but shaken shadows of the thing that died. It seemed to Zobal that their forms grew dim and diaphanous, and he saw the cracks in the flagstones beyond them; and their writhings lessened with those of Ujuk; and when Ujuk lay still at last, the faint outlines of the figures vanished as if erased from earth and air. Naught remained but the noisome bulk of that fiend who had been the progeny of the abbot Uldor and the lamia. And the bulk shrank visibly from instant to instant beneath its sagging garments, and a smell of ripe corruption arose, as if all that was human in the hellish thing were rotting swiftly away.

Cushara had scrambled to his feet and was peering about in a stunned fashion. His heavy armor had saved him from the talons of his assailants; but the armor itself was scored from greaves to helmet with innumerable scratches.

“Whither have the monks gone?” he inquired. “They were all about me an instant ago, like so many wild dogs worrying a fallen aurochs.”

“The monks were but emanations of Ujuk,” said Zobal. “They were mere fantasms, multiple eidola, that he sent forth and withdrew into himself at will; and they had no real existence apart from him. With Ujuk’s death they had become less than shadows.”

“Verily, such things are prodigious,” opined the pikebearer.

The warriors now turned their attention to Rubalsa, who had struggled to a sitting posture amid the downfallen wreckage of her bed. The tatters of rotten quilting which she clutched about her with shamefast fingers at their approach, served but little to conceal her well-rounded ivory nakedness. She wore an air of mingled fright and confusion, like a sleeper who has just awakened from some atrocious nightmare.

“Had the incubus harmed thee?” inquired Zobal anxiously. He was reassured by her faint, bewildered negative. Dropping his eyes before the piteous disarray of her girlish beauty, he felt in his heart a deeper enamorment than before, a passion touched with such tenderness as he had never known in the hot, brief loves of his hazard-haunted days. Eyeing Cushara covertly, he knew with dismay that this emotion was shared to the fullest by his comrade.

The warriors now withdrew to a little distance and turned their backs decorously while Rubalsa dressed.

“I deem,” said Zobal in a low voice beyond overhearing of the girl, “that thou and I tonight have met and conquered such perils as were not contracted for in our service to Hoaraph. And I deem that we are of one mind concerning the maiden, and love her too dearly now to deliver her to the captious lust of a sated king. Therefore we cannot return to Faraad. If it please thee, we shall draw lots for the girl; and the loser will attend the winner as a true comrade till such time as we have made our way from Izdrel, and have crossed the border of some land lying beyond Hoaraph’s rule.”

To this Cushara agreed. When Rubalsa had finished her dressing, the two began to look about them for such objects as might serve in the proposed sortilege. Cushara would have tossed one of the gold coins, stamped with Hoaraph’s image, which had rolled from Simban’s torn moneybag. But Zobal shook his head at the suggestion, having espied certain items which he thought even more exquisitely appropriate than the coin. These objects were the talons of the incubus, whose corpse had now dwindled in size and was horribly decayed, with a hideous wrinkling of the whole head and an actual shortening of the members. In this process, the claws of hands and feet had all dropped away and were lying loose on the pavement. Removing his helmet, Zobal stooped down and placed with it the five hellish-looking talons of the right hand, among which that of the index finger was the longest.

He shook the helmet vigorously, as one shakes a dicebox, and there was a sharp clattering from the claws. Then, he held the helmet out to Cushara, saying: “He who draws the forefinger talon shall take the girl.”

Cushara put in his hand and withdrew it quickly, holding aloft the heavy thumbnail, which was shortest of all. Zobal drew the nail of the middle

finger; and Cushara, at his second trial, brought forth the little finger's claw. Then, to the deep chagrin of the pike-bearer, Zobal produced the dearly coveted index talon.

Rubalsa, who had been watching this singular procedure with open curiosity, now said to the warriors:

"What are ye doing?"

Zobal started to explain, but before he had finished, the girl cried out indignantly: "Neither of ye has consulted my preference in this matter." Then, pouting prettily, she turned away from the disconcerted archer and flung her arms about the neck of Cushara.

THE VOYAGE OF KING EUVORAN

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

The crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned only from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. The magically graven gold of its circlet had been mined from a huge meteor that fell in the southern isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle from shore to shore with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of Earth, and was changeable in color from a flamelike red to the yellow of young moons. It was set with thirteen jewels, every one of which was unique and without fellow even in fable. These jewels were a wonder to behold, starring the circlet with strange unquiet fires and fulgurations terrible as the eyes of the cockatrice. But more wonderful than all else was the stuffed gazolba-bird which formed the superstructure of the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws above the wearer's brow, and towering royally with resplendent plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was the hue of burnished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in bezels of silver; and seven lacy, miniated quills arose from its ebon-dappled head, and a white tail fell down in a straightly spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle. The gazolba-bird was the last of its kind, according to the mariners who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east of Zothique. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim, and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, and a talisman inseparable from their royalty, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the ninth wearer of the crown. Superbly and magnificently he had worn it for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamander's eggs. On all state occasions, levees and daily grantings of public audience and administerings of justice, it had graced the brow of the young king and had conferred upon him a dreadful majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the lamentable increase of an early baldness.

It came to pass, in the late autumn of the third year of his reign, that King Euvoran rose from a goodly breakfast of twelve courses and twelve wines, and went forth as was his custom to the hall of justice, which occupied an entire wing of his palace in the city of Aramoam, looking down in several-colored marble from its palmy hills to the rippled lazuli of the orient ocean.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most involute skeins of legality and crime, and was likewise ready for the meting of swift punishment to all malefactors. And beside him, at the right arm of his kraken-sculptured throne of ivory, there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head that was tempered to the hardness of iron. Full often, with this mace, the bones of the more flagitious offenders were broken immediately, or their brains were split in the kings presence on a floor that was strewn with black sand. And beside the left arm of the throne, a professional torturer busied himself continually with the screws and pulleys of certain fearsome instruments of torture, as a warning of their fate to all evil-doers. And not always idle were the turnings of these screws and the tightenings of these pulleys, and not always empty were the metal beds of the machines.

Now, on that morning, the constables of the city brought before King Euvoran only a few petty thieves and suspicious vagrants; and there were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of the torture-implements. So the king, who had looked forward to a pleasurable session, was somewhat balked and disappointed; and he questioned with much severity the minor culprits before him, trying to extort from each of them, in turn, an admission of some graver crime than that whereof he was accused. But it seemed that the pilferers were innocent of aught but pilfering; and the vagrants were guilty of naught worse than vagrancy; and Euvoran began to think that the morning would offer scant entertainment. For the bastinado was the heaviest punishment that he could legally impose on such misdemeanants.

“Away with these mackerel!” he roared to the officers, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. “Away with them, for they pollute my presence. Give each of them a hundred strokes with the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels. Then drive them forth from Aramoam toward

the public refuse-grounds, and prod them with red-hot tridents if they linger in their crawling."

Then, ere the officers could obey him, there entered the hall of justice two belated constables, haling between them a peculiar and most unsavory individual with the long-handled, many pointed hooks that were used in Aramoam for the apprehending of malefactors and suspects. And though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as the filthy rags that served him for raiment, the prisoner bounded perpetually aloft in the manner of a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of tumblers. With a final volitation in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the incredible personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement, blinking rapidly, and was not prepossessed by the singular suppleness with which he louted to the very floor, upsetting the scarce-recovered equilibrium of the officers, and causing them to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

"Ha! What have we now?" said the king in an ominous voice.

"Sire, 'tis another vagabond," replied the breathless officers, when they had regained a more respectfully inclined position. "He would have passed through Aramoam by the main avenue in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the altitude of his saltations, if we had not arrested him."

"Such behavior is highly suspicious," growled Euvoran hopefully. "Prisoner, declare your name, your nativity and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which, beyond doubt, you are guilty."

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to regard Euvoran, the royal mace-wielder, and the royal torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree; his nose, ears and other features were all possessed of unnatural mobility; and he grimaced perpetually in a manner that caused his unclean beard to toss and curl like seaweed on a boiling whirlpool.

"I have many names," he replied, in an insolent voice whose pitch was peculiarly disagreeable to Euvoran, setting his teeth on edge like the grating of metal on glass. "As for my nativity and occupation, the knowledge of these, O king, would profit you little."

“Sirrah, you are malapert. Give answer or tongues of red-hot iron shall question you,” roared Euvoran.

“Be it known to you, then, that I am a necromancer, and was born in the realm where the dawn and the sunset come together and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun.”

“Ha! A necromancer!” snorted the king. “Know you not that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? Verily, we shall find means to dissuade you from the practice of such infamies.”

At a sign from Euvoran, the officers drew their captive toward the instruments of torture. Much to their surprise, in view of his former ebullience, he allowed himself to be chained supinely on the iron bed that produced a remarkable elongation of the limbs of its occupants. The official engineer of these miracles began to work the levers, and the bed lengthened little by little with a surly grating, till it seemed that the prisoner’s joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; and though, after a time, he had gained more than a half-cubit from the stretching, he appeared to experience no discomfort whatever; and to the stupefaction of all present, it became plain that the elasticity of his arms, legs and body was beyond the extensibility of the rack itself; for the latter was now drawn to its limits.

All were silent, viewing this prodigy; and Euvoran rose from his seat and went over to the rack, as if doubtful of his own eyes that testified to a thing so enormous. And the prisoner said to him:

“It were well to release me, O King Euvoran.”

“Say you so?” the king cried out in a rage. “However, it is not thus that we deal with felons in Ustaim.” And he made a private sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, rearing his massive, leaden-headed mace aloft.

“On your own head be it,” said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the iron bed, breaking the bonds that held him, as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a terrible height, which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger, dark and sere as that of a mummy, at the king’s crown; and simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of migrant fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night. And lo! As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran’s head and

the king felt that his brow was lightened by the crown's goodly and well-accustomed weight. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all who were present, beheld above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been slain more than two hundred years before by sea-faring men in a remote isle. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread as if for flight, and it carried still in its steely claws the rare circlet of the crown. Librating, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in wordless awe and consternation. Then, with metallic whirring, its white tail deployed like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open portals, and passed seaward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it, with great bounds and goatish leapings, the necromancer followed; and no man tried to deter him. But those who saw him depart from the city swore that he went north along the ocean-strand, while the bird flew directly eastward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. Thereafter, as if he had gone at a single bound into alien realms, the necromancer was not seen in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley from Sotar, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-main, a several-colored glory still flying toward the sources of the dayspring. And they said that the crown of changeable gold, with its thirteen fellowless gems, was still carried by the bird. And though they had trafficked long in the archipelagoes of wonder, and had seen many prodigies, they deemed this thing a most rare and unexampled portent.

King Euvoran, so strangely reft of that avian head-gear, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants in the hall of justice, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. If the sun had turned black in heaven, or his palace walls had crumbled about him, his dumbfoundment would hardly have been more excessive. For it seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem and the talisman of his fathers. And, moreover, the thing was wholly against nature, and the laws of god and man were annulled thereby: since never before, in all history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity, and Euvoran, having donned a voluminous turban of purple samite, held council with the sagest ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than the king: for the bird and the circlet were both

irreplaceable. And in the meanwhile, the rumor of this misfortune was borne abroad through Ustaim, and the land became filled with lamentable doubt and confusion, and some of the people began to murmur covertly against Euvoran, saying that no man could be the rightful ruler of that country without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in a time of national exigence, Eurovan repaired to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, who was a terrestrial god and the chief deity of Aramoam. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet, as was ordained by hierarchal law, he entered the dim adytum where the image of Geol, potbellied, and wrought of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and regarded the motes in a narrow beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. And, falling prone in the dust that had gathered around the idol through ages, the king gave homage to Geol, and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. And after an interim, a voice issued from the god's navel, as if a subterrene rumbling had become articulate. And the voice said to King Eurovan:

"Go forth and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie beneath the orient sun. There, O king, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty; and there, with thine own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran was much comforted by this oracle, since the utterances of the god were deemed infallible. And it seemed to him that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim, which had the reanimated bird for its superstructure. So, returning to the royal palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest argosies of war, which lay then at anchor in the tranquil harbor of Aramoam, and ordered them to make immediate provision for a long voyage into the east and among the archipelagoes of morning.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship of the fleet, which was a towering quadrireme with oars of beef-wood and sails of stout woven byssus dyed in yellowish scarlet, and a long gonfalon at the mast head, bearing the gazolba bird in its natural colors on a field of heavenly cobalt. The rowers and sailors of the quadrireme were mighty Negroes from the north; and the soldiers who manned it were fierce mercenaries from Xylac in the west; and with him, going aboard, the king took certain of his concubines and jesters and other ministrants, as well as

an ample store of liquors and rare viands, so that he should lack for nothing during the voyage. And mindful of the prophecy of Geol, the king armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with parrot-feathered arrows; and he also carried a sling of lion-leather and a blowgun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage; for a wind blew strongly from the west on the morning of the departure; and the fleet, which numbered fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the sea-risen sun. And the farewell clamors and shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and the marble houses of Aramoam on its four palmy hills here drowned in that swiftly foundering bank of azure which was the shoreline of Ustaim. And, thereafter, for many days, the iron-wood beaks of the galleys clove a softly weltering sea of indigo that rose unbroken on all sides to a cloudless, dark-blue heaven.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, that earthen god who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his wont; and reclining beneath a saffron canopy on the poop of the quadrireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace-vaults, storing the warmth of elder, ardent suns whereon oblivion's black rime was fallen. And he laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, at unquenchable ancient bawdries that had won the laughter of other kings in the sea-lost continents of yore. And his women diverted him with harlotries that were older than Rome or Atlantis. And ever he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons wherewith he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba-bird, according to the oracle of Geol.

The winds were unfailing and auspicious, and the fleet sped onward, with the great black oarsmen singing gaily at their oars, and the gorgeous sailcloths flapping loudly, and the long banners floating on the air like straight-blown flames. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coasts of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred leagues from north to south; and in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer of that isle, named Iffibos, had drawn it down through his sorcery and had closed it in a cage of sandalwood. So the king landed in Loithe, deeming his quest perhaps already nigh to its end, and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to

visit Iffibos, who dwelt in a retired vale among the mountains at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey, and Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, which were no respecters of royalty, and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. And when, after some delay and divagation in the deep jungle, he came to the house of Iffibos on a high, precarious crag, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to the region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. So the king returned to Loithe, after declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. And in Loithe the king tarried no longer than was needful for the laying aboard of fifty jars of the sovereign arrack in which Sotar excels all other lands.

Then, coasting the southern cliffs and promontories, where the sea bellowed prodigiously in mile-deep caverns, the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar, and Tosk, whose people were more akin to apes and lemurs than to men. And Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba, and received only a chattering as of apes in answer. So the king ordered his men-at-arms to catch a number of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. And the men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day among the trees and boulders in which the isle abounded, but without catching a single one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying several of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him and sailed on to the seven atolls of Yumatot, whose inhabitants were mostly cannibals. And beyond Yumatot, which was the usual limit of eastern voyaging from Ustaim, the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea, and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story.

It were tedious to relate the full particulars of that voyage, in which Euvoran and his captains went ever toward the sources of the dawn. Various and without number were the strange marvels they found in the archipelagoes beyond Yumatot; but nowhere could they find a single feather such as had formed part of the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

Howbeit, the king beheld many a flock of unknown, fiery-winged fowl that went over the galleys in mid-sea, passing between the unmarked islets. And, landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyrebirds and

boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun. And he chased the dodo and dinornis on shores that were otherwise unpeopled. And once, in a sea of high-beetling barren rocks, the fleet was assailed by mighty griffins that flew down from their crag-built eyries, with wings shining like feathery brass under the meridian sun, and making a harsh clangor as of shields shaken in battle. And the griffins, being both ferocious and pertinacious, were driven away with much difficulty by boulders hurled from the catapults of the vessels.

Everywhere, as the ships drove eastward, there were multitudes of fowl. But at the sunset of a day in the fourth moon following their departure from Aramoam, the vessels approached a nameless isle that towered mile-high with cliffs of black, naked basalt, around whose base the sea cried with baffled anger, and about whose precipices there were no wings nor voices of birds. The isle was topped with gnarly cypresses that might have grown in a windy graveyard; and sullenly it took the afterglow, as if drenched with a gore of darkening blood. Far up in the cliffs there were strange columned eaves like the dwellings of forgotten troglodytes, but seemingly inaccessible to men; and the caves to all appearances were unoccupied by any kind of life, though pitting the face of the isle for leagues. And Euvoran ordered his captains to drop anchor, meaning to search for a landing-place on the morrow: since, in his anxiety to retrieve the gazolba, he would pass no isle of the dawnward main, not even the unlikeliest, without due inquiry and examination.

Quickly fell the darkness, without moon, till the close-anchored ships were visible to each other only by their lanterns. And Euvoran sat at supper in his cabin, sipping the golden arrack of Sotar between mouthfuls of mango-jelly and phenicopter’s meat. And, saving a small watch on each of the vessels, the sailors and men-at-arms were all at evening mess; and the rowers ate their figs and lentils in the oar-decks. Then, from the watches, there was a wild shouting of alarm, and the shouting ceased in a moment, and each of the vessels rocked and sagged in the water, as if a monstrous weight had settled upon it. No man knew the thing that had happened, but everywhere there was turmoil and confusion, some saying that the fleet was attacked by pirates. Those who peered from the ports and oar-holes saw that the lanterns of their neighbors had been quenched, and perceived a milling and seething as of low-driven clouds in the darkness, and saw that foul

black creatures, large as men and winged like oupires, were clinging to the ranged oars in myriads. And those who dared to approach the open hatches found that the decks, the rigging and the masts were crowded with similar creatures, who, it seemed, were of nocturnal habit and had come down in the manner of bats from their caves in the island.

Then, like things of nightmare, the monsters began to invade the hatches and assail the ports, clawing with hellish talons at the men who opposed them. And, being somewhat hampered by their wings, they were driven back with spears and arrows, but returned again and again in a thickening press without number, cheeping with a faint and bat-like sound. It was plain that they were vampires, for whenever they had dragged a man down, as many of them as could gain mouthhold would fasten on him incontinently, and suck his blood till little more remained than a skinful of bones. The upper oar-decks, being half open to the sky, were quickly usurped, and their crews overcome with a hideous swarming; and the rowers in the orlops cried that the sea-water was pouring in through the oar-holes as the ships sank deeper beneath an ever-gathering weight.

All night, at the ports and hatches, the men of Euvoran fought the vampires, taking turns in shifts when they wearied. Many of them were seized and their blood sucked before the eyes of their fellows as the night wore on; and the vampires, it seemed, were not to be slain by mortal weapons, though the blood they had gorged came forth in spouting rills from their wounded bodies. And thicklier they clustered upon the fleet, till the biremes began to founder, and the rowers were drowned in the sunken lower decks of certain triremes and quadriremes.

King Euvoran was wroth at this unseemly turmoil that had interrupted his supper; and when the golden arrack was spilt and the dishes of rare meat were emptied on the floor by the vessel’s violent rocking, he would have issued from his cabin, fully armed, to try conclusions with these piacular miscreants. But, even as he turned to fling wide the cabin-door, there was a soft infernal pittering at the port-holes behind him; and the women who were with him began to shriek, and the fools cried out in terror. And the king saw in the lamplight a grisly face with the teeth and nostrils of a flittermouse, that leaned in through one of the cabin-ports. He sought to repel the face, and thereafter, till dawn, he fought the vampires with those very weapons he had designed for the slaying of the gazolba; and the ship’s

captain, who was with him at supper, guarded a second port with his claymore; and the others were held by two of the king's eunuchs, armed with scimitars. In this warfare they were favored by the smallness of the ports, which could hardly in any case have allowed the free passage of their winged assailants. And, after lightless hours of tedious, horrid struggle, the darkness became thinned with brown twilight, and the vampires lifted from the vessels in a black cloud and returned to their caves in the mile-high cliffs of that unnamed island.

Heavy was the heart of Euvoran within him when he surveyed the damage done to his proud argosies of war: for, among the fifteen vessels, seven had sunk in the night, borne under and swamped by those obscenely clinging hordes of oupires; and the decks of the others were bloody as abbatoirs; and half of the sailors and rowers and men-at-arms were lying flat and flaccid as empty wineskins after the greedy drinking of the great bats. And the sails and banners were shredded into rags; and everywhere, from beak to rudder of Euvoran's galleys, there was the stain and reek of a Stymphalian foulness. So, lest another eve should find them within wing-shot of that accursed isle, the king ordered his remaining captains to weigh anchor; and the other ships, with sea-water still awash in their orlops, and some with drowned rowers still at the oars of their nether banks, drew slowly and heavily to eastward, till the pitted walls of the isle began to sink beneath the main. At eve there was no land in sight anywhere; and after two days, still unharried by the vampires, they came to a coral island, low in the wave, with a calm lagoon that was haunted only by ocean-fowl. And there, for the first time, Euvoran paused to repair his tattered sails, and pump the sea from his holds, and clean the blood and vileness from his decks.

However, in spite of this disaster, the king abated not in any degree his purpose, to sail ever on toward the fountains of the day, until, as Geol had predicted, he should come again on the flown gazolba and slay it with his own royal hand. So, for another moon, they passed amid other and stranger archipelagoes, and penetrated deeplier into the regions of myth and story.

Bravely they drove into mornings of amaranth crossed by gilded lories, and noontides of darkly ardent sapphire where the rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien-figured Signs they heard the wild, melancholy crying of swans that flew southward fleeing the winter of realms indiscoverable, and

seeking the summer in trackless worlds. And they held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the ell-wide pennons of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them; and men who arrayed themselves in apyornis plumes. And they spoke also with antic people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of a new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers. But nowhere could they learn aught of the gazolba.

At mid-forenoon, early in the sixth month of the voyage, a new and unheard-of shore ascended from the deep, curving for many miles, from northeast to southwest, with sheltered harbors, and cliffs and pinnacled crags that were interspaced with low-lying verdurous dales. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran and his captains saw that towers were builded on certain of the highmost crags; but in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass. And, sailing still nearer, and entering the harbor, they descried no evident sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds, ranging in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wingspread than eagle or condor. They circled the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary; and Euvoran saw that a winged concourse, as it were, went to and fro above the woods and about the cliffs and towers. He bethought him that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba; so, arming himself for the chase, he went ashore in a small boat with several of his men.

The birds, even the largest, were patently timid and inoffensive; for when the king landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland, or sought the crags and pinnacles that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and Euvoran marvelled at such cunning; and moreover he was somewhat exasperated, for he wished not to depart without bringing down a trophy of his skill, even though he should fail to find the gazolba itself. And he deemed the behavior of the birds all the more curious because of the island’s solitude: for here there were no paths other than would be made by forest animals; and the woods and meadows were

wholly wild and incult; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their empty windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods along the shore, and came to a steep slope of bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower at one side. Here, at the slope's bottom, Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if wholly unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. And Euvoran trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry. And he was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of the men who accompanied him cried out as if in alarm. Then, turning his head as he stooped beneath the foliage of the cedar, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet descried on that isle, who came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him with the drumming of their mighty vans, and beating him instantly to the ground, so that he was aware of them only as a storm of dreadfully rushing plumes and a hurlyburly of cruel beaks and talons. And, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the birds fastened its huge claws in the shoulder-cape of the king's mantle, not sparing the flesh beneath in its fell clutch, and carried him away to the tower on the crag as easily as a ger-falcon would have carried a small leveret. The king was wholly helpless, and he had dropped his longbow beneath the onset of the birds, and his blowgun had been shaken loose from the girdle at which it depended, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. And he had no weapon remaining, other than a sharp misericordia; and this he could not use to any purpose against his captor in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if with derision till he was deafened by their din. And a sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried and the violence of his ascent; and giddily he saw the walls of the tower sink past him with wide and portal-like windows. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a high and spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face and lay vomiting for a while, heedless of his surroundings. Then, recovering somewhat, he raised himself to a sitting position, and beheld before him, above a sort of dais, an

enormous perch of red gold and yellow ivory wrought in the form of a new crescent arching upward. The perch was supported between posts of black jasper flecked as if with blood, and upon it there sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran with a grim and dreadful and austere mien, as an emperor might eye the gutter-scum that his guards have haled before him for some obscene offense. The plumage of the bird was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a mighty pick-ax of pale bronze that darkened greenly toward the point, and he clutched the perch with iron talons that were longer than the mailed fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with quills of turquoise blue and amber yellow, like many a pointed crown; and about his long, unfeathered throat, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads, and the heads of various ferine beasts such as the weasel, the wildcat, the stoat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no larger than groundnuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl; and his alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other birds of a size inferior only to his were sitting about the chamber on less costly and less elevated perches, even as grandees of the realm might sit in the presence of their sovereign. And behind Euvoran, like guards, there stood together with its fellow the creatures that had rapt him to the tower.

Now, adding to his utter confounding, the great Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech. And the bird said to him in a harsh but magniloquent and majestic voice:

“Too hardily, O filth of mankind, thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds, and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For know that I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim on this terraqueous globe of Earth; and in Ornava is my seat and my capital. Verily, justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defence, I will give thee hearing now, for I would not that even the vilest of earthly vermin, and the most pernicious, should accuse me of inequity or tyranny.”

Then, blustering somewhat, though sorely afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer to the bird, and said:

“I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me together with the crown through the spell

of a lawless necromancer. And know that I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow me to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species."

Thereat the ruler of the birds, as if amazed and more indignant than before, made question of Euvoran and interrogated him sharply concerning the gazolba. And, learning that this bird had been slain by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the whole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried in a great and wrathful voice:

"This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a twofold and a triple infamy: for thou hast owned a most abominable thing and one that subverteth nature. In this my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but truly, it is not allowable nor sufferable that man should do thus to birds. So, for the sake of justice and retribution, I shall presently commit thee to one of my taxidermists. Indeed, methinks that a stuffed king (since even the vermin have kings) will serve to enhance my collection."

After that, he addressed Euvoran's guards and enjoined them: "Away with this vileness. Confine it to the man-cage, and maintain a strict watch before it."

Euvoran, urged and directed by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sort of sloping ladder with broad rungs of teak, that led from the chamber to one above it in the tower's top. In the center of this room there was a bamboo cage of capacity more than ample for the housing of six men. The king was driven into the cage, and the birds bolted the door upon him with their claws, which seemed to have the deftness of fingers. Thereafter one of them remained by the cage, eyeing Euvoran vigilantly through the spaces of the bars; and the other flew away through a great window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, since the cage contained no better provision for his comfort. Despair was heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. And sorely was he astonished, that a bird should speak with human speech, insulting and reviling humankind; and he deemed it an equally monstrous thing that a bird should dwell in royal state, with servitors to do his will, and the pomp and power of a king. And, pondering these unholy prodigies, Euvoran waited for his doom in the man-cage; and after awhile, water and raw grain

were brought to him in earthen vessels; but he could not eat the grain. And still later, as the day drew toward afternoon, he heard a shouting of men and a shrieking of birds below the tower; and above these noises, anon, there were clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. So Euvoran knew that his sailors and soldiers, having seen him borne into captivity in the tower, were assailing the place in an effort to succor him. And the noises waxed, mounting to a most tremendous and atrocious din, and there were cries as of people mortally wounded, and a vengeful shrilling as of harpies in battle. Then, presently, the clamor ebbed away, and the shoutings grew faint, and Eurovan knew that his men had failed to take the tower. And hope waned within him, dying in a darker murk of despair.

So the afternoon went over, declining seaward, and the sun touched Euvoran with its level beams through a western window and colored the bars of his cage with a mockery of gold. Presently, the light flowed from the room, and after awhile the twilight rose, weaving a tremulous phantom web of the pale air. And between the sunset and the darkness, a night-guard came in to relieve the day-flying owl who warded the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes, and he stood taller that Euvoran himself, and was formed and feathered somewhat in the burly fashion of an owl, and he had the stout legs of a megapode. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, which burned upon him with a brighter bale as the dusk deepened. Hardly could he sustain that ever vigilant scrutiny. But anon the moon rose, being but little past the full, and poured a spectral quicksilver into the room, and paled the eyes of the bird; and Euvoran conceived a desperate plan.

His captors, deeming all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the misericordia, which was long and double-edged and needle-sharp at the tip. And stealthily he gripped the hilt of his misericordia under his mantle, and feigned a sudden illness with groanings and tossings and convulsions that threw him against the bars. And, even as he had schemed, the great nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owl-like head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, pretending a more violent convulsion, drew the misericordia from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

Shrewdly the thrust went home, piercing the deepest veins, and the squawking of the bird was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so that Euvoran feared that all the occupants of the tower would be awakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were bootless; for none came to the chamber; and soon the flappings ceased, and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers. Thereupon the king proceeded with his plan, and shot back the bolts of the wide-latticed bamboo door with small difficulty. Then, going to the head of the teak-wood ladder which ran to the room beneath, he looked down and beheld the ruler of the birds asleep in the moonlight on his chryselephantine perch, with his terrible pick-ax beak under his wing. And Euvoran was afraid to descend into the chamber, lest the ruler should awake and see him. And also, it occurred to him that the lower stories of the tower might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had slain.

Again his despair returned upon him; but being of a sleightful and crafty bent, Euvoran bethought him of another scheme. With much labor, using the misericordia, he skinned the mighty nyctalops, and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then Euvoran wrapped himself in the skin, with the head of the nyctalops rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amidst the feathers. And the skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and his potbelly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the heavy shanks of the bird as he walked.

Then, imitating the gait and carriage of this fowl, the king descended the ladder, treading cautiously to avoid a fall and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. And the ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many great birds asleep on perches, and the king was nigh to perishing with terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him. And he went down into a third room, and was startled to see therein the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clad like merchants, and others nude and ruddled with bright ores like savages. And the men were still and stark as if enchanted; and the

king feared them little less than he had feared the birds. But remembering that which the ruler had told him, he divined that these were persons who had been captured even as he himself, and had been slain by the birds and preserved through the art of an avian taxidermy. And, trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of birdkind. And the room below this was the ground story of the tower, and its windows and portals were being guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to that whose skin was worn by the king. Here, indeed, was his greatest peril and the supreme trial of his courage; for the birds eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs, and they greeted him with a soft whoo-whooing as of owls. And the knees of Euvoran knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but, imitating the sound in reply, he passed among the guards and was not molested by them. And, reaching an open portal of the tower, he saw the moonlight rock of the crag lying at a distance of no more than two cubits below him; and he hopped from the doorsill in the manner of a fowl, and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge along the crag, till he reached the upper beginning of that declivity at whose bottom he had slain the little owl. Here his descent was easier, and he came anon to the woods around the harbor.

But, ere he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows about him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows, and he roared out in anger, and dropped the mantling birdskin. Thereby, no doubt, he was saved from death at the hands of his own men, who were coming through the woods with intent to assail the tower at night. And, learning this, the king forgave the jeopardy in which their arrows had placed him. But he thought it best to refrain from attacking the tower, and to quit the isle with all dispatch. So returning to his flagship, he ordered all his captains to set sail immediately; for, knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was more than apprehensive of pursuit; and he deemed it well to place a wide interval of sea between his vessels and that isle ere dawn. So the galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a northeastern promontory, they went due east in a course contrary to the moon. And, Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, regaled himself with a variety and plenitude of viands to make up for his fasting in the man-cage; and he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and added thereto a jarful of the puissant pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway betwixt midnight and morn, when the isle of Ornava was left far behind, the steersmen of the vessels beheld a wall of ebon cloud that rose swiftly athwart the heavens, spreading and toppling in towers of thunder, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on as if with the loosed hurricanes of hell through a welter of unstarred chaos. The ships were sundered in the gloom and were borne far apart; and at daybreak the king's quadrireme was alone in a prone-rushing tumult of mingled wave and cloud; and the mast was shattered, along with most of the beef-wood oars; and the vessel was a toy for the demons of the tempest.

For three days and nights, with no glimmer of sun or star discerned through the ever-boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract of elements pouring to some bottomless gulf beyond the fringes of the world. And early on the fourth day the clouds were somewhat riven; but a wind still blew like the breath of perdition. Then, lifting darkly through the spray and vapor, a half-seen land arose before the prow, and the helmsman and the rowers were wholly helpless to turn the doomed ship from its course. And shortly after, with a great crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, the vessel struck on a low reef hidden by the flying foam, and its lower decks were flooded quickly. And the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and the water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Gaunt and cragged and austere was the shore beyond the reef, beheld only through the veils of the sea's foaming fury. And scant, it seemed, was the hope of reaching land. But, ere the wrecked argosy had gone beneath him, Euvoran lashed himself with ropes of coir to an empty wine-barrel, and cast himself from the sloping deck. And those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard by the typhoon, leapt after him into that high wallowing sea, some trusting only to their might as swimmers and others clinging to casks or broken spars or planks. And most were drawn under in the seething maelstroms or were beaten to death on the rocks; and of all the ship's company, the king alone survived and was cast ashore with the breath of life unquenched within him by the bitter sea.

Half-drowned and senseless, he lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence, and the billows came in with falling crests, and the clouds went over in a rack of pearl, and the sun, climbing above the rock, shone down upon Euvoran from a deep

immaculate azure. And the king, still dazed from the buffeting rudeness of the sea, heard dimly and as if in a dream the shrilling of an unknown bird. Then, opening his eyes, he beheld betwixt himself and the sun, librating on spread wings, that various-colored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice that was harsh and shrill as that of the peafowl, the bird hung above him for a moment, and then flew inland through a rift among the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys of war, the king unbound himself in haste from the empty barrel; and, rising giddily, he followed the bird. And, though he was now weaponless, it seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a great cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the high and rugged crags, he found a sheltered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and woods of exotic leaf, and fragrant orient shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers of fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba; and among them he was unable to distinguish the one he had followed, deeming it the avian garniture of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was a thing beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed fowl unique and fellowless throughout the world, even as the other components of the crown of Ustaim. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the mariners who had slain the birds in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of its kind.

However, though wrath and confusion were in his heart, Euvoran bethought him that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem and the talisman of his royalty in Ustaim, and would vindicate his quest among the isles of dawn. So, with a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. And ever before him as he chased them, the birds flew from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking, and a flurry of plumes that wrought an imperial splendor on the air. And at length, by his own good aim or the cast of chance, Euvoran slew him a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered raiment of an uncouth cut, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with tough grass. And the man

wore in lieu of other headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his matted beard; and the king beheld him with surprise and anger, and cried loudly:

"Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to a dire accounting of these deeds."

At this, eyeing Euvoran strangely, the man laughed a long and derisive laugh, as if he deemed the king a person somewhat addled in his wits. And he seemed to find much merriment in the aspect of the king, whose garments were draggled and were stiff and stained with the drying sea-water, and whose turban had been snatched away by the felon waves, leaving his baldness without disguise. And when he had done laughing, the man said:

"Verily, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. For nine years agone I was shipwrecked on this isle, being a sea-captain from the far southwestern land of Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship's company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no other man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes, and has no people other than the birds. And as for your questions, they are readily answered: I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of famine, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance, apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because my tarboosh was stolen by the sea whenas it flung me rudely upon this strand. And I wot not of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover, your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless, and you and I are alone thereon, and I am the stronger of us twain and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran; and since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl: for I must deem that you are more familiar with the products of the culinary art than with the practice."

Now, hearing all this, the wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in the true oracle of Geol. And he knew that the wreckage of his fleet of war was

scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor live in pleasant luxury, nor administer the dooms of law between the torturer and the executioner in the hall of justice, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. So, not being utterly bereft of reason, he bowed him to his destiny.

And he said to the sea-captain, “There is sense in what you say. Therefore lead on.”

Then, laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and the captain, whose name was Naz Obbamar, repaired companionably to a cave in the rocky hill-slope of the isle’s interior, which Naz Obbamar had chosen for his abode. Here the captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs, and showed the king the proper manner in which to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood. And Euvoran, being famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. And after they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing a wine he had made from certain berries; and he and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns, and told each other the tale of their adventures, and forgot for a while the rudeness and desolation of their plight.

Thereafter they shared the isle of gazolbas, killing and eating the birds as their hunger ordained. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they slew and ate some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made him a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolba, even as Naz Obbamar had done. And this was the fashion of their days till the end.

THE MAZE OF THE ENCHANTER

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

With no other light than that of the four diminutive moons of Xiccarph, each in a different phase but all decrescent, Tiglari had crossed the bottomless swamp of Soorm, wherein no reptile dwelt and no dragon descended—but where the pitch-black ooze was alive with continual heavings and writhings. He had carefully avoided the high causey of white corundum that spanned the fen, and had threaded his way with infinite peril from isle to sedgy isle that shuddered gelatinously beneath him. When he reached the solid shore and the shelter of the palm-tall rushes, he was equally careful to avoid the pale porphyry stairs that wound heavenward through dizzy, nadir-cleaving chasms and along glassy scarps to the ever-mysterious and terrible house of Maal Dweb. The causey and the stairs were guarded by those that he did not wish to meet: the silent, colossal iron servitors of Maal Dweb, whose arms ended in long crescent blades of tempered steel which were raised in implacable scything against any who came thither without their master's permission.

Tiglari's naked body was smeared from crown to heel with the juice of a jungle plant repugnant to all the fauna of Xiccarph. By virtue of this he hoped to pass unharmed the ferocious ape-like creatures that roamed at will through the cliff-hung gardens and halls of the Tyrant. He carried a coil of woven root-fiber, wonderfully strong and light, and weighted with a brazen ball at one end, for use in climbing the mountain. At his side, in a sheath of chimera-skin, he wore a needle-sharp knife that had been dipt in the mortal poison of winged vipers.

Many, before Tiglari, with the same noble dream of tyrannicide, had attempted to cross the pitchy fen and scale the forbidding scarps. But none had returned; and the fate of such as had actually won to the mountain palace of Maal Dweb was a much-disputed problem; since no man had ever again beheld them, living or dead. But Tiglari, the jungle hunter, skilled in the slaying of fierce and crafty beasts, was undeterred by the more than hideous probabilities before him.

The escalade of the mountain would have been a highly dangerous feat by the full light of the three suns of Xiccarph. With eyes that were keen as those of some night-flying pterodactyl, Tiglari hurled his weighted coil about projecting coigns and fang-like salients. Hand over hand, he went up with simian ease from foothold to precarious foothold; and at length he attained a narrow buttress beneath the final cliff. From this vantage, it was an easy matter to fling his rope around the crooked bole of a tree that leaned gulfward with scimitar-like foliage from the gardens of Maal Dweb.

Evading the sharp and semi-metallic leaves that seemed to slash downward as the tree bent limberly with his dangling weight, he stood, stooping warily, on the fearsome and widely fabled mesa. Here, it was rumored, with no human aid, the half-demoniac sorcerer and scientist had carved the more lofty pinnacles of the old mountain into walls, cupolas and turrets, and had levelled a great space about them. This space he had covered immediately with loamy soil, produced by magic; and therein he had planted curious baneful trees from outlying worlds beyond the suns of Xiccarph, together with flowers that might have been those of some teeming and exuberant hell.

Little enough was actually known of these gardens; but the flora that grew on the northern, southern and western sides of the palace was popularly believed to be less deadly than that which faced the dawning of the triple suns. Much of this latter vegetation, according to myth, had been trained and topiarized in the form of an almost infinite labyrinth, balefully ingenious, from which egress was impossible: a maze that concealed in its windings the most fatal and atrocious traps, the most unpredictable dooms, invented by the malign Daedalus. Mindful of this labyrinth, Tiglari had approached the place on the side that fronted the three-fold sunset.

Breathless, with arms that ached from the long, arduous climb, he crouched in the garden shadows. About him he saw the heavy-hooded blossoms that leaned from a winy gloom in venomous languour, or fawned toward him with open corollas that exhaled a narcotic perfume or diffused a pollen of madness. Anomalous, multiform, with silhouettes that curdled the blood or touched the brain with nightmare, the trees of Maal Dweb appeared to gather and conspire against him beyond the flowers. Some arose with the sinuous towering of plumed pythons, or aigretted dragons. Others crouched with radiating limbs that were like the hairy members of

colossal arachnidans. They seemed to close in upon Tiglari with a stealthy motion. They waved their frightful darts of thorn, their scythe-like leaves. They blotted the four moons with webs of arabesque menace. They reared from interminably coiling roots behind mammoth foliages that resembled an army of interlocking shields.

With endless caution and calculation, the hunter made his way forward, seeking a rift in the armed phalanx of vegetable monstrosities. His faculties, ever alert, were abnormally quickened by a grievous fear, intensified by a mighty hatred. The fear was not for himself, but for the girl Athlé, his beloved and the fairest of his tribe, who had gone up alone that very evening by the causey of corundum and the porphyry stairs at the summons of Maal Dweb. His hatred was that of a brave man and an outraged lover for the all-powerful, all-dreaded tyrant whom no man had ever seen, and from whose abode no woman came back; who spoke with an iron voice that was audible at will in the far cities or the outmost jungles; who punished the rebellious and the disobedient with a doom of falling fire that was swifter than the thunderstone.

Maal Dweb had taken ever the fairest from among the maidens of the planet Xiccarph; and no palace of the walled towns, or savage outland cave, was exempt from his unknown scrutiny. He had chosen no less than fifty girls during the three decades of his tyranny; and these, forsaking their lovers and kinsfolk voluntarily, lest the wrath of Maal Dweb should descend upon them, had gone one by one to the mountain citadel and were lost behind its cryptic walls. There, as the odalisques of the aging sorcerer, they were supposed to dwell in halls that multiplied their beauty with a thousand mirrors; and were said to have for servants women of brass and men of iron that mimicked in all ways the motion and speech of living people.

Tiglari had poured before Athlé the uncouth adoration of his heart and the barbaric spoils of the chase, but having many rivals, was still unsure of her favor. Cool as a river lily, and no less impartial, she had accepted his worship and that of the others, among whom the warrior Mocair was perhaps the most formidable. Returning at eve from the hunt, Tiglari had found the tribe in lamentation; and, learning that Athlé had departed to the harem of Maal Dweb, was swift to follow.

He had not announced his intention to his fellow tribesmen, since the ears of Maal Dweb were everywhere; and he did not know whether Mocair or any of the others had preceded him in his desperate errantry. Mocair, however, had been absent; and it was not unlikely that he had already dared the obscure and hideous perils of the mountain.

The thought of this was enough to drive Tiglari forward with a rash disregard of the poisonous, reptile flowers and clutching foliations. He came anon to a gap in the horrible grove, and saw the saffron lights from the lower windows of Maal Dweb, and a dark thronging of domes and turrets that assailed the constellations above. The lights were vigilant as the eyes of sleepless dragons, and appeared to regard him with an evil, unblinking awareness. But Tiglari leapt toward them, across the gap, and heard the clash of sabered leaves that met behind him.

Before him was an open lawn, covered with a queer grass that squirmed like innumerable worms beneath his bare feet. He did not care to linger upon that lawn, but ran onward with light, skimming paces. There were no footmarks in the grass; but nearing the portico of the palace, he saw a coil of thin rope that someone had flung aside, and knew that Mocair had preceded him.

There were paths of mottled marble about the palace, and fountains and waterfalls that played with a gurgling as of blood from the throats of carven monsters. The open portals were unguarded, and the whole building was still as a mausoleum lit by windless lamps. No shadows moved behind the brilliant yellow windows; and darkness slept unbroken among the high towers and cupolas. Tiglari, however, mistrusted sorely the appearance of quietude and slumber, and followed the bordering paths for some distance before daring to approach nearer to the palace.

Certain large and shadowy animals, which he took for the apish monsters of Maal Dweb, went by him in the gloom. They were hairy and uncouth, with sloping heads. Some of them ran in four-footed fashion, while others maintained the half-erect posture of anthropoids. They did not offer to molest Tiglari; but, whining dismally like dogs, they slunk away as if to avoid him. By this token, he knew that they were veritable beasts, and could not abide the odor with which he had smeared his limbs and torso.

At length, he came to a lampless portico with crowded columns. Here, with the silent gliding of a jungle snake, he entered the mysterious and ever-

dreadful house of Maal Dweb. Behind the dark pillars, a door stood open; and beyond the door were the dim and seemingly endless reaches of an empty hall.

Tiglari went in with redoubled caution, and began to follow the arrased wall. The place was full of unknown perfumes, languorous and somnolent: a subtle reek as of censers in hidden alcoves of love. He did not like the perfumes; and the silence troubled him more and more as he went deeper into the palace. It seemed to him that the darkness was thick with unheard breathings, was alive with invisible and sinister movements.

Slowly, like the opening of great yellow eyes, the yellow flames arose in mighty lamps of copper that hung along the hall. Tiglari hid himself behind a heavy-figured arras; but peeping out with eerie trepidation, he saw that the hall was still deserted. Finally, he dared to resume his progress. All about him, the imperial hangings, broidered with purple men and azure women on a field of bright blood, appeared to stir with easy life in a wind that he could not feel; and the lamps regarded him with unwavering splendid eyes. But there was no sign of the presence of Maal Dweb; and the metal servitors and human odalisques of the tyrant were nowhere to be seen.

The doors on either side of the hall, with cunningly mated valves of ebony and ivory, were all closed. At the far end, Tiglari saw a rift of flaming light in a somber double arras. Parting the arras very softly, he peered into a huge, brightly illumined chamber that seemed at first sight to be the harem of Maal Dweb, peopled with all the girls that the enchanter had summoned to his mountain dwelling over a course of decades. In fact, it seemed that there were many hundreds, leaning or recumbent on ornate couches, or standing in attitudes of languor or terror. Tiglari discerned in the throng the women of Ommu-Zain, whose flesh is whiter than desert salt; the slim girls of Uthmai, who are moulded from breathing, palpitating jet; the queenly amber girls of equatorial Xala; and the small women of Ilap, who have the tones of newly greening bronze. But among them all, he could not find the lilied beauty of Athlé.

Greatly did he marvel at the number of the women and the utter stillness with which they maintained their various postures. There was no lifting nor falling of eyelids, no dropping of hands, no curving nor opening of lips. They were like images of living, subtly painted marble, or goddesses that slept in some enchanted hall of eternity.

Tiglari, the intrepid hunter, was awed and frightened. Here, surely, was proof of the fabled sorceries of Maal Dweb. These women—if indeed they were women and not mere statues—had been made the thralls of a death-like spell of immortal slumber. It was as if some invisible medium of adamantine silence had filled the room, had formed about its occupants: a silence wherein, it seemed, no mortal being could draw breath.

However, if Tiglari were to continue his search for Maal Dweb and Athlé, it was necessary for him to traverse the enchanted chamber. Feeling that a marble sleep might descend upon him at the very crossing of the sill, he went with holden breath and furtive pard-like paces. About him, the women preserved their eternal stillness, their various airs and attitudes. Each, it appeared, had been overcome by the spell at the instant of some particular emotion, whether of fear, wonder, curiosity, vanity, weariness, anger or voluptuousness. Their number was fewer than he had supposed, and the room itself was smaller, but metal mirrors, panelling the walls, had created an illusion of multitude and immensity.

At the further end, he came to a second double arras, slightly parted, and revealing only shadow beyond. Peering through, he beheld a twilight chamber, illuminated dimly by two censers that gave forth a parti-colored glow and a red fume as of vaporing blood. The censers were set on lofty tripods in the far corners, facing each other. Between them, beneath a canopy of some dark and smouldering stuff with fringes braided like women's hair, was a couch of nocturnal purples with a valance of silver birds that fought against golden snakes. On the couch, in sober garments, a man reclined as if weary or asleep. The face of the man was a pale mask of mystery lying amid ambiguous shadows; but it did not occur to Tiglari that this being was any other than the redoubtable and tyrannic sorcerer whom he had come to slay. He knew that this was Maal Dweb, whom no man had seen in the flesh, but whose power was manifest to all; the occult, omniscient ruler of Xiccarph; the overlord of kings; the suzerain of the three suns and of all their moons and planets.

Like ghostly sentinels, the symbols of the grandeur of Maal Dweb, the images of his frightful empire, rose up to confront Tiglari. But the thought of Athlé was a red mist that blotted all. He forgot his eerie terrors, his awe of the ensorcelled palace. The rage of the bereaved lover, the bloodthirst of the cunning hunter, awoke within him to guide his agile, stealthy paces, to

make firm his powerful thews. The chamber was empty, except for the still and languid figure on the couch. Tiglari neared the unconscious sorcerer; and his hand grew tight on the hilt of the needle-like knife that was dipt in viper-venom.

The man before him lay with closed eyes and a cryptic weariness on his mouth and eyelids. He seemed to meditate rather than sleep, like one who wanders in a maze of distant memories or profound reveries. About him the walls were draped with funereal hangings, darkly and vaguely figured. Above him the twin censers wrought a cloudy glow, and diffused throughout the room their drowsy myrrh, which made the senses of Tiglari swim with a strange dimness.

Crouching tiger-wise beside the valance of birds and serpents, he made ready for the stroke. Then, mastering the subtle vertigo of the perfumes, he rose up; and his arm, with the darting movement of some heavy but supple adder, struck fiercely at the tyrant's heart.

It was as if he had tried to pierce a wall of adamant. In mid-air, before and above the recumbent enchanter, the knife clashed on some impenetrable substance that Tiglari could not see; and the point broke off and tinkled on the floor at his feet. Uncomprehending, baffled, he peered at the being whom he had sought to slay. Maal Dweb had not stirred nor opened his eyes. There was neither frown nor smile on his features; but their look of enigmatic weariness was somehow touched with a faint and cruel amusement.

Hesitantly, Tiglari put out his hand to verify a certain curious notion that had occurred to him. Even as he had suspected, there was no couch or canopy between the fuming censers—only a vertical, unbroken, highly-polished surface, in which the whole scene was apparently reflected. He had tried to kill a mirrored image. But, to his further mystification, he himself was not visible in the mirror.

He whirled about, thinking Maal Dweb must be somewhere in the room. Even as he turned, the funereal draperies rushed back with an evil, silken whispering from the wall, as if drawn by unseen hands. The chamber leaped into sudden glaring light, the walls appeared to recede illimitably; and naked giants, whose umber-brown limbs and torsos glistened as if smeared with ointment, stood in menacing postures on every side. Their eyes

glowered like those of jungle creatures; and each of them held an enormous knife, from which the point had been broken.

This, thought Tiglari, was a fearsome thaumaturgy; and he crouched down beneath the tripods, wary as a trapped animal, to await the assault of the giants. But these beings, crouching simultaneously, mimicked his every movement. By degrees it came to him that what he saw was his own reflection, multiplied and monstrously amplified in the mirrors of Maal Dweb.

He turned again. The tasseled canopy, the couch of night-dark purples with its figured valance, the reclining dreamer in plain vestments, all had vanished. Of that which he had beheld, only the smoking censers remained, rearing before a glassy wall that gave back like the others the reflection of Tiglari himself.

Bafflement and terror united now in the savage brain of the hunter. He felt that Maal Dweb, the all-seeing, all-potent magician, was playing a game and was deluding him with elaborate mockeries. Rashly indeed had Tiglari pitted his simple brawn and forest craft against a being of such supernatural power and demoniac artifice. He dared not stir; he scarcely ventured to breathe. The monstrous reflections appeared to watch him like ogres who guard a captive pygmy. The light, which emanated as if from hidden lamps in the mirrors, took on a more pitiless and alarming luster, and centered itself upon him with a silent horror. The vast, illusive reaches of the room appeared to deepen; and far away in their shadows, he saw the gathering of vapors with human faces that melted and re-formed incessantly and were never twice the same.

Ever the eerie radiance brightened; ever the mist of faces, like a hell-born fume, dissolved and re-limned itself behind the immobile giants, in the lengthening vistas. An unheard laughter, malevolent, scornful, seemed to lurk beyond the stillness. How long Tiglari waited, he could not tell; the bright and frozen horror of that room was a thing apart from time.

Now, in the litten air, a voice began to speak; a voice that was toneless, deliberate—and disembodied. It was faintly contemptuous; a little weary; slightly cruel. It was impossible to align or locate; near as the beating of Tiglari's heart, and yet infinitely far.

"What do you seek, Tiglari?" said the voice. "Do you think to enter with impunity the palace of Maal Dweb? Others—many others, with the same

intentions have come before you: but all have paid a certain price for their temerity."

"I seek the maiden Athlé," said Tiglari. "What have you done with her?" The words were strange to him, their very sound was remote, as if another than himself had spoken.

"Athlé is very beautiful," replied the voice. "It is the will of Maal Dweb to make a certain use of her loveliness. The use is not one that should concern a hunter of wild beasts… You are unwise, Tiglari."

"Where is Athlé?" persisted the hunter.

"Athlé has gone to find her fate in the labyrinth of Maal Dweb. Not long ago, the warrior Mocair, who had followed her to my palace, went out at my suggestion to pursue his search amid the threadless windings of that never to be exhausted maze. Go now, Tiglari, and seek her also… There are many mysteries in my labyrinth; and among them all, mayhap, there is one which you are destined to solve."

The hunter saw that a door had opened in the mirror-panelled wall. In the depth of the mirrors, two of the metal slaves of Maal Dweb had appeared. Taller than living men, and gleaming from head to foot with implacable lusters as of burnished swords, they came forward upon Tiglari. The right arm of each was handed with a crescent sickle. Hastily, with no backward glance, the hunter went out through the open door. Behind him he heard the surly clash of its meeting valves.

The short night of the planet Xiccarph was not yet over, and the four moons had all gone down. But before him he saw the beginning of the fabled maze, illuminated clearly by glowing globular fruits that hung lantern-wise from baroque arches and arcades of foliage. Guided by their still, uncanny luminescence, he entered the labyrinth.

At first, it was a place of elfin fantasies and whims. There were quaintly turned estrades, pillared with slim and antic trees, latticed with the drolly peering faces of extravagant orchids, that led the seeker to hidden, surprising bowers of goblinry. It was as if those outer meanderings had been planned merely to entice and bemuse and beguile.

Then, by vague degrees, as the hunter went on, it seemed that the designer's mood had darkened, had become more ominous and baleful. The trees that lined the path, with twisted, intertwining boles, were Laocoons of struggle and torture, lit by enormous fungi that seemed to lift unholy tapers.

The path itself ran downward, or climbed with evilly tilted steps through caverns of imbricated leafage that shone with the brazen glistening of dragon-scales. At every turning the way divided before Tiglari; the devious branchings multiplied; and skillful though he was in jungle-craft, it would have been wholly impossible for him to retrace his wanderings. He kept on, hoping that chance would somehow lead him to Athlé; and many times he called her name aloud, but was answered only by remote, derisive echoes, or by the dolorous howling of some unseen beast that had become lost in the maze of Maal Dweb.

He came to eerie pools, alight with coiling and wreathing witch-fires, in dim arboreal grottoes. Greenish, bloated hands as of dead men appeared to lift from the changing films of phosphorescence; and once he thought that he beheld the drowning face of Athlé. He plunged into the shallow pool—but found only fetid slime, and a swollen, nauseous thing that squirmed slowly beneath his touch.

Now he was mounting through arbors of malignant hydra growths that coiled and uncoiled about him tumultuously. The way lightened more and more; the night-shining fruits and blossoms were pale and sickly as the dying tapers of a witches' revel. The earliest of the three suns had risen; and its gamboge-yellow beams were filtering in through the plaited horrors of frilled and venomous vines.

Far off, and seeming to fall from some hidden height in the labyrinth before him, he heard a chorus of brazen voices that were like articulate bells or gongs. He could not distinguish the words; but the accents were those of a solemn and portentous announcement. They were fraught with mystic finality, with hieratic doom. They ceased; and there was no sound other than the hiss and rustle of swaying plants.

Tiglari went on. The tortuous maze became wilder and more anomalous. There were tiered growths, like obscene sculptures or architectural forms, that seemed to be of stone and metal. Others were like carnal nightmares of rooted flesh, that wallowed and fought and coupled in noisome ooze. Foul things with chancrous blossoms flaunted themselves on infernal obelisks. Living parasitic mosses of crimson crawled on vegetable monsters that swelled and bloated behind the columns of accursed pavilions.

It seemed now that the hunter's every step was predestined and dictated. He was no longer free to choose his way; for many paths were overgrown

by things that he did not care to face; and others were blocked by horrid portcullises of cacti, or ended in pools whose waters teemed with leeches larger than tunnies. The second and third suns of Xiccarph arose; but their beams of emerald and carmine served but to heighten the terrors of the web that had closed in about Tiglari.

By stairs where floral serpents crept, and gradients lined with tossing, clashing aloes, he climbed slowly on. Rarely could he see the labyrinthine reaches below, or the levels toward which he was tending. Somewhere on the blind path, he met one of the ape-like animals of Maal Dweb: a dark, savage creature, sleek and glistening like a wet otter, as if it had bathed in one of the hidden pools. It passed him with a hoarse growl, recoiling as the others had done from his repulsively smeared body… But nowhere could he find the maiden Athlé or the warrior Mocair, who had preceded him into the maze.

Now he had reached a curious little pavement of somber onyx, oblong, and wholly surrounded, except on the side of his approach, by enormous flowers with fluted bronze-like stems and great leaning balls that seemed to be the mottled heads of bestial chimeras, yawning to disclose their carmine throats. Through the gap in this singular hedge, he stepped forward on the pavement and stood staring irresolutely at the serried blooms: for here the way seemed to end.

The onyx beneath his feet was wet with some unknown, sticky fluid. He was dazed with the wonder, strangeness, and intricate, coiling horror through which he had passed; but a dim warning of peril stirred within him. He turned toward the gap through which he had entered, but his impulse of retreat was all too late. From the base of each of the tall flower stems, a long tendril like a wire of bronze uncoiled with lightning rapidity, and closed about his ankles. He stood trapped and helpless at the center of a taut net. Then, while he struggled ineffectually, the huge stems began to lean and tilt toward him, till the carmine mouths of the blossoms were close about his knees like a circle of fawning monsters.

Nearer they came, almost touching him. From their thick lips a clear, hueless liquid, dripping slowly at first, and then running in little rills, descended on his feet and ankles and shanks. Indescribably, his flesh crawled beneath it; then there was a peculiar passing numbness; then a furious stinging like the bites of innumerable insects. Between the crowding

heads of the flowers he saw that his legs had undergone a mysterious and horrifying change; their natural hairiness had thickened, had assumed a dark and shaggy pile like the fur of apes; the shanks themselves had somehow shortened; and the feet had grown longer, with uncouth finger-like toes such as were possessed by the animals of Maal Dweb!

In a frenzy of nameless alarm and fear, he drew his broken-tipped knife and began to slash at the flowers. It was as if he had struck at monstrous bells of ringing iron, had assailed the armored heads of dragons. The blade snapped at the hilt. Then the blossoms, lifting hideously, were leaning about his waist, were laving his hips and thighs in their thin, evil slaver.

Across the bizarre nightmare in which his brain and body were drowning impotently, he heard the startled cry of a woman. Through the open gap in the hedge, he beheld a strange scene which the hitherto impenetrable maze, parting as if magic, had revealed. Fifty feet away, on the same level as the onyx pavement, there stood an elliptic dais or low altar of moonwhite stone at whose center the maiden Athlé, emerging from the labyrinth on a raised walk of porphyry, had paused in an attitude of wonder. Before her, in the claws of an immense marble lizard that reared above the dais, a great circular mirror of steely metal was held upright, with the monster's head hidden from view behind it. Athlé, as if fascinated by some celestial vision, was peering into the steely disk. She presented her wide-eyed profile to Tiglari; and the mirror itself was seen obliquely, with the foreshortened body of the lizard reaching away at a sharp angle and mingling obscenely with the half-reptilian maze. Midway between the onyx pavement and the ellipse of pale stone, a row of six slender brazen columns, topped with graven heads like demoniac Termini, rose at broad intervals and faced alternately the hunter and the girl.

Tiglari would have called out to Athlé; but at that moment she took a single step toward the mirror, as if drawn by something that she saw in its depths; and the dull disk seemed to brighten with some internal, incandescent flame. The eyes of the hunter were temporarily blinded by the spiky rays that leapt forth from it for an instant, enveloping and transfixing the maiden. When the dimness cleared away in swirling blots of sultry color, he saw that Athlé, in a pose of statuesque rigidity, was still regarding the mirror with startled eyes. She had not moved; the wonder was frozen on her face: and it came to Tiglari that she was like the women who slept an

enchanted slumber in the palace of Maal Dweb. Even as this thought occurred to him, he heard the ringing chorus of metallic voices, that seemed to emanate from the graven demon heads upon the columns.

"The maiden Athlé," announced the voices in solemn and portentous tones, "has beheld herself in the mirror of Eternity, and has passed forever beyond the changes and corruptions of Time."

Tiglari felt that he was sinking into some enormous, obscurely terrible fen of dreams. He could comprehend nothing of what had befallen Athlé; and his own fate was an equally dark and dread enigma beyond the solution of a simple hunter.

Now the leaning blossoms had lifted about his shoulders, were laving his arms, his body. Beneath their abhorrent alchemy the transformation continued. A long fur sprang up on the thickening torso; the arms lengthened; they became simian; the hands took on a likeness to the feet. From the neck downward, Tiglari differed in no wise from the apes of the garden.

In helpless abject terror, he waited for the completion of the metamorphosis. Then, slowly, he became aware that a man in sober garments, with eyes and mouth replete with the weariness of strange things, was standing before him. Behind the man, as if attending him, were two of the sickle-handed automatons of iron.

In a somewhat languid voice, the man uttered an unknown word that vibrated in the air with prolonged, mysterious aftertones. The circle of craning flowers drew back from Tiglari, resuming their former upright positions in a weird hedge; and the wiry tendrils were withdrawn from his ankles, leaving him free. Hardly able to comprehend his release, he heard a sound of brazen voices, and knew dimly that the demon heads of the columns had spoken, saying:

"The hunter Tiglari has been laved in the nectar of the blossoms of primordial life, and has become in all ways, from the neck downward, even as the beasts that he hunted."

When the solemn chorus ceased, the weary man in sober raiment came nearer and addressed him:

"I, Maal Dweb, had intended to deal with you precisely as I dealt with Mocair and many others. Mocair was the beast that you met in the labyrinth, with new-made fur that was still sleek and wet from the liquor of

the flowers; and you saw some of his predecessors about the palace. However, I find that my whims are not always the same. You, Tiglari, unlike the others, shall at least remain a man from the neck upward; and you are free to resume your wanderings in the labyrinth, and escape from it if you can. I do not wish to see you again, and my clemency arises from another reason than esteem for your kind. Go now: the maze has many windings which you are yet to traverse."

A dreadful awe was upon Tiglari; his native fierceness, his savage volition, were tamed by the enchanter's languid will. With one backward look of fearful concern and wonder at the frozen shape of Athlé, he withdrew obediently, slouching like a great ape. His fur glistening wetly to the three suns, he vanished amid the meanderings of the labyrinth.

Maal Dweb, attended by his metal slaves, went over to the figure of Athlé, which still regarded the steely mirror with astonished eyes.

"Mong Lut," he said, addressing by name the nearer of the two automatons that followed at his heels, "it has been, as you know, my caprice to eternalize the frail beauty of women. Athlé, like the others whom I have summoned to the mountain and have sent out to explore the ingenious maze, has looked upon that mirror whose sudden radiance turns the flesh to a stone that is fairer than marble and no less eternal… Also, as you know, it has been my whim to turn men into beasts with the copious fluid of certain artificial flowers, so that their outer semblance should conform strictly to their inner nature. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should have done these things? Am I not Maal Dweb, in whom all knowledge and all power reside?"

"Yes, master," echoed the automaton in an iron voice, "you are Maal Dweb, the all-wise, the all-powerful, and it is well that you should have done these things."

"However," continued Maal Dweb, "the repetition of even the most remarkable thaumaturgies can grow monotonous after a certain number of times. I do not think that I shall deal again in this fashion with any woman, nor deal thus with any man. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should vary my sorceries in future? Am I not Maal Dweb, the all-resourceful?"

"Indeed, you are Maal Dweb," agreed the automaton, "and it would be well for you to diversify your enchantments."

Maal Dweb, in his manner, was not ill pleased with the answers that the automaton had given. He cared little for converse, other than the iron echoing of his metal servitors, who assented always to all that he said, and who spared him the tedium of arguments. And it may have been that there were times when he wearied a little even of this, and preferred the silence of the petrified women, or the muteness of the beasts that could no longer call themselves men.

THE DOUBLE SHADOW

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

My name is Pharpetron, among those who have known me in Poseidonis; but even I, the last and most forward pupil of the wise Avyctes, know not the name of that which I am fated to become ere tomorrow. Therefore, by the ebbing silver lamps, in my master's marble house above the loud, ever-ravening sea, I write this tale with a hasty hand, scrawling an ink of wizard virtue on the grey, priceless, antique parchment of dragons. And having written, I shall enclose the pages in a sealed cylinder of orichalchum, and shall cast the cylinder from a high window into the sea, lest that which I am doomed to become should haply destroy the writing. And it may be that mariners from Lephara, passing to Umb and Pneor in their tall triremes, will find the cylinder; or fishers will draw it from the wave in their seines of byssus; and having read my story, men will learn the truth and take warning; and no man's feet, henceforward, will approach the pale and demon-haunted house of Avyctes.

For six years, I have dwelt apart with the aged master, forgetting youth and its wonted desires in the study of arcanic things. Together, we have delved more deeply than all others before us in an interdicted lore; we have solved the keyless hieroglyphs that guard ante-human formulae; we have talked with the prehistoric dead; we have called up the dwellers in sealed crypts, in fearful abysses beyond space. Few are the sons of mankind who have cared to seek us out among the desolate, wind-worn crags; and many, but nameless, are the visitants who have come to us from further bourns of place and time.

Stern and white as a tomb, older than the memory of the dead, and built by men or devils beyond the recording of myth, is the mansion in which we dwell. Far below, on black, naked reefs, the northern sea climbs and roars indomitably, or ebbs with a ceaseless murmur as of armies of baffled demons; and the house is filled evermore, like a hollow-sounding sepulcher, with the drear echo of its tumultuous voices; and the winds wail in dismal wrath around the high towers, but shake them not. On the seaward side, the mansion rises sheerly from the straight-falling cliff; but on the other sides

there are narrow terraces, grown with dwarfish, crooked cedars that bow always beneath the gale. Giant marble monsters guard the landward portals; and huge marble women ward the strait porticoes above the sea; and mighty statues and mummies stand everywhere in the chambers and along the halls. But, saving these, and the spirits we have summoned, there is none to companion us; and liches and shadows have been the servitors of our daily needs.

All men have heard the fame of Avyctes, the sole surviving pupil of that Malygris who tyrannized in his necromancy over Susran from a tower of sable stone; Malygris, who lay dead for years while men believed him living; who, lying thus, still uttered potent spells and dire oracles with decaying lips. But Avyctes lusted not for temporal power in the manner of Malygris; and having learned all that the elder sorcerer could teach him, withdrew from the cities of Poseidonis to seek another and vaster dominion; and I, the youth Pharpetron, in the latter years of Avyctes, was permitted to join him in this solitude; and since then, I have shared his austerities and vigils and evocations…and now, likewise, I must share the weird doom that has come in answer to his summoning.

Not without terror (since man is but mortal) did I, the neophyte, behold at first the abhorrent and tremendous faces of them that obeyed Avyctes: the genii of the sea and earth, of the stars and the heavens, who passed to and fro in his marmorean halls. I shuddered at the black writhing of submundane things from the many-volumed smoke of the braziers; I cried in horror at the grey foulnesses, colossal, without form, that crowded malignly about the drawn circle of seven colors, threatening unspeakable trespass on us that stood at the center. Not without revulsion did I drink wine that was poured by cadavers, and eat bread that was purveyed by phantoms. But use and custom dulled the strangeness, destroyed the fear; and in time I believed implicitly that Avyctes was the lord of all incantations and exorcisms, with infallible power to dismiss the beings he evoked.

Well had it been for Avyctes—and for me—if the master had contented himself with the lore preserved from Atlantis and Thule, or brought over from Mu and Mayapan. Surely this should have been enough: for in the ivory-sheeted books of Thule there were blood-writ runes that would call the demons of the fifth and seventh planets, if spoken aloud at the hour of

their ascent; and the sorcerers of Mu had left record of a process whereby the doors of far-future time could be unlocked; and our fathers, the Atlanteans, had known the road between the atoms and the path into far stars, and had held speech with the spirits of the sun. But Avyctes thirsted for a darker knowledge, a deeper empery; and into his hands, in the third year of my novitiate, there came the mirror-bright tablet of the lost serpent-people.

Strange, and apparently fortuitous, was our finding of the tablet. At certain hours, when the tide had fallen from the steep rocks, we were wont to descend by cavern-hidden stairs to a cliff-walled crescent beach behind the promontory on which stood the house of Avyctes. There, on the dun, wet sands, beyond the foamy tongues of the surf, would lie the worn and curious driftage of alien shores, and trove that hurricanes had cast up from unsounded deeps. And there we had found the purple and sanguine volutes of great shells, and rude lumps of ambergris, and white flowers of perpetually blooming coral; and once, the barbaric idol of green brass that had been the figurehead of a galley from far hyperboreal isles.

There had been a great storm, such as must have riven the sea to its nethermost profound; but the tempest had gone by with morning, and the heavens were cloudless on that fatal day when we found the tablet, and the demon winds were hushed among the high crags and chasms; and the sea lisped with a low whisper, like the rustle of gowns of samite trailed by fleeing maidens on the sand. And just beyond the ebbing wave, in a tangle of russet seaweed, we beheld a thing that glittered with blinding sun-like brilliance. And running forward, I plucked it from the wrack before the wave's return, and bore it to Avyctes.

The tablet was wrought of some nameless metal, like never-rusting iron, but heavier. It had the form of a triangle and was broader at the widest than a man's heart. On one side it was wholly blank; and Avyctes and I, in turn, beheld our features mirrored strangely, like the drawn, pallid features of the dead, in its burnished surface. On the other side many rows of small crooked ciphers were incised deeply in the metal, as if by the action of some mordant acid; and these ciphers were not the pictorial symbols or alphabetic characters of any language known to the master or to me.

Of the tablet's age and origin, likewise, we could form no conjecture; and our erudition was altogether baffled. For many days thereafter we

studied the writing and held argument that came to no issue. And night by night, in a high chamber closed against the perennial winds, we pondered over the dazzling triangle by the tall straight flames of silver lamps. For Avyctes deemed that knowledge of rare value (or haply some secret of an alien or elder magic) was holden by the clueless crooked ciphers. Then, since all our scholarship was in vain, the master sought another divination, and had recourse to wizardy and necromancy. But at first, among the devils and phantoms that answered our interrogation, none could tell us aught concerning the tablet. And any other than Avyctes would have despaired in the end…and well would it have been if he had despaired, and had sought no longer to decipher the writing.…

* * * *

The months and years went by with a slow thundering of seas on the dark rocks, and a headlong clamor of winds around the white towers. Still we continued our delvings and evocations; and further, always further we went into lampless realms of space and spirit; learning, perchance, to unlock the hithermost of the manifold infinities. And at whiles, Avyctes would resume his pondering of the sea-found tablet; or would question some visitant from other spheres of time and place regarding its interpretation.

At last, by the use of a chance formula, in idle experiment, he summoned up the dim, tenuous ghost of a sorcerer from prehistoric years; and the ghost, in a thin whisper of uncouth, forgotten speech, informed us that the letters on the tablet were those of a language of the serpent-men, whose primordial continent had sunk aeons before the lifting of Hyperborea from the ooze. But the ghost could tell us naught of their significance; for, even in his time, the serpent-people had become a dubious legend; and their deep, ante-human lore and sorcery were things irretrievable by man.

Now, in all the books of conjuration owned by Avyctes, there was no spell whereby we could call the lost serpent-men from their fabulous epoch. But there was an old Lemurian formula, recondite and uncertain, by which the shadow of a dead man could be sent into years posterior to those of his own life-time, and could be recalled after an interim by the wizard. And the shade, being wholly insubstantial, would suffer no harm from the temporal

transition, and would remember, for the information of the wizard, that which he had been instructed to learn during the journey.

So, having called again the ghost of the prehistoric sorcerer, whose name was Ybith, Avyctes made a singular use of several very ardent gums and combustible fragments of fossil wood; and he and I, reciting the responses to the formula, sent the thin spirit of Ybith into the far ages of the serpent-men. And after a time which the master deemed sufficient, we performed the curious rites of incantation that would recall Ybith from his alienage. And the rites were successful; and Ybith stood before us again, like a blown vapor that is nigh to vanishing. And in words that were faint as the last echo of perishing memories, the specter told us the key to the meaning of the letters, which he had learned in the primeval past; and after this, we questioned Ybith no more, but suffered him to return unto slumber and oblivion.

Then, knowing the import of the tiny, twisted ciphers, we read the writing on the tablet and made thereof a transliteration, though not without labor and difficulty, since the very phonetics of the serpent tongue, and the symbols and ideas expressed in the writing, were somewhat alien to those of mankind. And when we had mastered the inscription, we found that it contained the formula for a certain evocation which, no doubt, had been used by the serpent sorcerers. But the object of the evocation was not named; nor was there any clue to the nature or identity of that which would come in answer to the rites. And moreover there was no corresponding rite of exorcism nor spell of dismissal.

Great was the jubilation of Avyctes, deeming that we had learned a lore beyond the memory or prevision of man. And though I sought to dissuade him, he resolved to employ the evocation, arguing that our discovery was no chance thing but was fatefully predestined from the beginning. And he seemed to think lightly of the menace that might be brought upon us by the conjuration of things whose nativity and attributes were wholly obscure. “For,” said Avyctes, “I have called up, in all the years of my sorcery, no god or devil, no demon or lich or shadow, which I could not control and dismiss at will. And I am loath to believe that any power or spirit beyond the subversion of my spells could have been summoned by a race of serpents, whatever their skill in demonism and necromancy.”

So, seeing that he was obstinate, and acknowledging him for my master in all ways, I consented to aid Avyctes in the experiment, though not without dire misgivings. And then we gathered together, in the chamber of conjuration, at the specified hour and configuration of the stars, the equivalents of sundry rare materials that the tablet had instructed us to use in the ritual.

Of much that we did, and of certain agents that we employed, it were better not to tell; nor shall I record the shrill, sibilant words, difficult for beings not born of serpents to articulate, whose intonation formed a signal part of the ceremony. Toward the last, we drew a triangle on the marble floor with the fresh blood of birds; and Avyctes stood at one angle, and I at another; and the gaunt umber mummy of an Atlantean warrior, whose name had been Oigos, was stationed at the third angle. And standing thus, Avyctes and I held tapers of corpse-tallow in our hands, till the tapers had burned down between our fingers as into a socket. And in the outstretched palms of the mummy of Oigos, as if in shallow thuribles, talc and asbestos burned, ignited by a strange fire whereof we knew the secret. At one side we had traced on the floor an infrangible ellipse, made by an endless linked repetition of the twelve unspeakable Signs of Oumor, to which we could retire if the visitant should prove inimical or rebellious. We waited while the pole-circling stars went over, as had been prescribed. Then, when the tapers had gone out between our seared fingers, and the talc and asbestos were wholly consumed in the mummy's eaten palms, Avyctes uttered a single word whose sense was obscure to us; and Oigos, being animated by sorcery and subject to our will, repeated the word after a given interval, in tones that were hollow as a tomb-born echo; and I in my turn also repeated it.

Now, in the chamber of evocation, before beginning the ritual, we had opened a small window giving upon the sea, and had likewise left open a high door on the hall to landward, lest that which came in answer to us should require a spatial mode of entrance. And during the ceremony, the sea became still and there was no wind, and it seemed that all things were hushed in awful expectation of the nameless visitor. But after all was done, and the last word had been repeated by Oigos and me, we stood and waited vainly for a visible sign or other manifestation. The lamps burned stilly in the midnight room; and no shadows fell, other than were cast by ourselves and Oigos and by the great marble women along the walls. And in the

magic mirrors we had placed cunningly, to reflect those that were otherwise unseen, we beheld no breath or trace of any image.

At this, after a reasonable interim, Avyctes was sorely disappointed, deeming that the evocation had failed of its purpose; and I, having the same thought, was secretly relieved. And we questioned the mummy of Oigos, to learn if he had perceived in the room, with such senses as are peculiar to the dead, the sure token or doubtful proof of a presence undescried by us the living. And the mummy gave a necromantic answer, saying that there was nothing.

"Verily," said Avyctes, "it were useless to wait longer. For surely in some way we have misunderstood the purport of the writing, or have failed to duplicate the matters used in the evocation, or the correct intonement of the words. Or it may be that in the lapse of so many aeons, the thing that was formerly wont to respond has long ceased to exist, or has altered in its attributes so that the spell is now void and valueless." To this I assented readily, hoping that the matter was at an end. So, after erasing the blood-marked triangle and the sacred ellipse of the linked Signs of Oumor, and after dismissing Oigos to his wonted place among other mummies, we retired to sleep. And in the days that followed, we resumed our habitual studies, but made no mention to each other of the strange triangular tablet or the vain formula.

Even as before, our days went on; and the sea climbed and roared in white fury on the cliffs, and the winds wailed by in their unseen, sullen wrath, bowing the dark cedars as witches are bowed by the breath of Taaran, god of evil. Almost, in the marvel of new tests and cantraips, I forgot the ineffectual conjuration, and I deemed that Avyctes had also forgotten it.

All things were as of yore, to our sorcerous perception; and there was naught to trouble us in our wisdom and power and serenity, which we deemed secure above the sovereignty of kings. Reading the horoscopic stars, we found no future ill in their aspect; nor was any shadow of bale foreshown to us through geomancy, or other modes of divination such as we employed. And our familiars, though grisly and dreadful to mortal gaze, were wholly obedient to us the masters.

Then, on a clear summer afternoon, we walked, as was often our custom, on the marble terrace behind the house. In robes of ocean-purple, we paced

among the windy trees with their blown, crooked shadows; and there, following us as we went to and fro, I saw the blue shadow of Avyctes and my own shadow on the marble; and between them, an adumbration that was not wrought by any of the cedars. And I was greatly startled, but spoke not of the matter to Avyctes, and observed the unknown shadow with covert care.

I saw that it followed closely the shadow of Avyctes, keeping ever the same distance. And it fluttered not in the wind, but moved with a flowing as of some heavy, thick, putrescent liquid; and its color was not blue nor purple nor black, nor any other hue to which man's eyes are habituated, but a hue as of some unearthly purulence; and its form was altogether monstrous, having a squat head and a long, undulant body, without similitude to beast or devil.

Avyctes heeded not the shadow; and still I feared to speak, though I thought it an ill thing for the master to be companioned thus. And I moved closer to him, in order to detect by touch or other perception the invisible presence that had cast the adumbration. But the air was void to sunward of the shadow; and I found nothing opposite the sun nor in any oblique direction, though I searched closely, knowing that certain beings cast their shadows thus.

After a while, at the customary hour, we returned by the coiling stairs and monster-flanked portals into the high house. And I saw that the strange adumbration moved ever behind the shadow of Avyctes, falling horrible and unbroken on the steps and passing clearly separate and distinct amid the long umbrages of the towering monsters. And in the dim halls beyond the sun, where shadows should not have been, I beheld with terror the distorted loathly blot, having a pestilent, unnamable hue, that followed Avyctes as if in lieu of his own extinguished shadow. And all that day, everywhere that we went, at the table served by specters, or in the mummy-warded room of volumes and books, the thing pursued Avyctes, clinging to him even as leprosy to the leper. And still the master had perceived it not; and still I forbore to warn him, hoping that the visitant would withdraw in its own time, going obscurely as it had come.

But at midnight, when we sat together by the silver lamps, pondering the blood-writ runes of Hyperborea, I saw that the shadow had drawn closer to the shadow of Avyctes, towering behind his chair on the wall between the

huge sculptured women and the mummies. And the thing was a streaming ooze of charnel pollution, a foulness beyond the black leprosies of hell; and I could bear it no more; and I cried out in my fear and loathing, and informed the master of its presence.

Beholding now the shadow, Avyctes considered it closely and in silence; and there was neither fear nor awe nor abhorrence in the deep, graven wrinkles of his visage. And he said to me at last:

"This thing is a mystery beyond my lore; but never, in all the practice of my art, has any shadow come to me unbidden. And since all others of our evocations have found answer ere this, I must deem that the shadow is a veritable entity, or the sign of an entity, that has come in belated response to the formula of the serpent-sorcerers, which we thought powerless and void. And I think it well that we should now repair to the chamber of conjuration, and interrogate the shadow in such manner as we may, to inquire its nativity and purpose."

We went forthwith into the chamber of conjuration, and made such preparations as were both necessary and possible. And when we were prepared to question it, the unknown shadow had drawn closer still to the shadow of Avyctes, so that the clear space between the two was no wider than the thickness of a necromancer's rod.

Now, in all ways that were feasible, we interrogated the shadow, speaking through our own lips and the lips of mummies and statues. But there was no determinable answer; and calling certain of the devils and phantoms that were our familiars, we made question through the mouths of these, but without result. And all the while, our magic mirrors were void of any reflection of a presence that might have cast the shadow; and they that had been our spokesmen could detect nothing in the room. And there was no spell, it seemed, that had power upon the visitant. So Avyctes became troubled; and drawing on the floor with blood and ashes the ellipse of Oumor, wherein no demon nor spirit may intrude, he retired to its center. But still within the ellipse, like a flowing taint of liquid corruption, the shadow followed his shadow; and the space between the two was no wider than the thickness of a wizard's pen.

Now, on the face of Avyctes, horror had graven new wrinkles; and his brow was beaded with a deathly sweat. For he knew, even as I, that this was

a thing beyond all laws, and foreboding naught but disaster and evil. And he cried to me in a shaken voice, and said:

"I have no knowledge of this thing nor its intention toward me, and no power to stay its progress. Go forth and leave me now; for I would not that any man should witness the defeat of my sorcery and the doom that may follow thereupon. Also, it were well to depart while there is time, lest you too should become the quarry of the shadow and be compelled to share its menace."

Though terror had fastened upon my inmost soul, I was loath to leave Avyctes. But I had sworn to obey his will at all times and in every respect; and moreover I knew myself doubly powerless against the adumbration, since Avyctes himself was impotent.

So, bidding him farewell, I went forth with trembling limbs from the haunted chamber; and peering back from the threshold, I saw that the alien umbrage, creeping like a noisome blotch on the floor, had touched the shadow of Avyctes. And at that moment the master shrieked aloud like one in nightmare; and his face was no longer the face of Avyctes but was contorted and convulsed like that of some helpless madman who wrestles with an unseen incubus. And I looked no more, but fled along the dim outer hall and through the high portals giving upon the terrace.

A red moon, ominous and gibbous, had declined above the terrace and the crags; and the shadows of the cedars were elongated in the moon; and they wavered in the gale like the blown cloaks of enchanters. And stooping against the gale, I fled across the terrace toward the outer stairs that led to a steep path in the riven waste of rocks and chasms behind Avyctes' house. I neared the terrace edge, running with the speed of fear; but I could not reach the topmost outer stair; for at every step the marble flowed beneath me, fleeing like a pale horizon before the seeker. And though I raced and panted without pause, I could draw no nearer to the terrace edge.

At length I desisted, seeing that an unknown spell had altered the very space about the house of Avyctes, so that none could escape therefrom to landward. So, resigning myself in despair to whatever might befall, I returned toward the house. And climbing the white stairs in the low, level beams of the crag-caught moon, I saw a figure that awaited me in the portals. And I knew by the trailing robe of sea-purple, but by no other token, that the figure was Avyctes. For the face was no longer in its entirety

the face of man, but was become a loathly fluid amalgam of human features with a thing not to be identified on earth. The transfiguration was ghastlier than death or the changes of decay; and the face was already hued with the nameless, corrupt and purulent color of the strange shadow, and had taken on, in respect to its outlines, a partial likeness to the squat profile of the shadow. The hands of the figure were not those of any terrene being; and the shape beneath the robe had lengthened with a nauseous undulant pliancy; and the face and fingers seemed to drip in the moonlight with a deliquescent corruption. And the pursuing umbrage, like a thickly flowing blight, had corroded and distorted the very shadow of Avyctes, which was now double in a manner not to be narrated here.

Fain would I have cried or spoken aloud; but horror had dried up the fount of speech. And the thing that had been Avyctes beckoned me in silence, uttering no word from its living and putrescent lips. And with eyes that were no longer eyes, but had become an oozing abomination, it peered steadily upon me. And it clutched my shoulder closely with the soft leprosy of its fingers, and led me half-swooning with revulsion along the hall, and into that room where the mummy of Oigos, who had assisted us in the threefold incantation of the serpent-men, was stationed with several of his fellows.

By the lamps which illumed the chamber, burning with pale, still, perpetual flames, I saw that the mummies stood erect along the wall in their exanimate repose, each in his wonted place with his tall shadow beside him. But the great, gaunt shadow of Oigos on the marble wall was companioned by an adumbration similar in all respects to the evil thing that had followed the master and was now incorporate with him. I remembered that Oigos had performed his share of the ritual, and had repeated an unknown stated word in turn after Avyctes; and so I knew that the horror had come to Oigos in turn, and would wreak itself upon the dead even as on the living. For the foul, anonymous thing that we had called in our presumption could manifest itself to mortal ken in no other way than this. We had drawn it from unfathomable depths of time and space, using ignorantly a dire formula; and the thing had come at its own chosen hour, to stamp itself in abomination uttermost on the evocators.

Since then, the night has ebbed away, and a second day has gone by like a sluggish ooze of horror.… I have seen the complete identification of the

shadow with the flesh and the shadow of Avyctes…and also I have seen the slow encroachment of that other umbrage, mingling itself with the lank shadow and the sere, bituminous body of Oigos, and turning them to a similitude of the thing which Avyctes has become. And I have heard the mummy cry out like a living man in great pain and fear, as with the throes of a second dissolution, at the impingement of the shadow. And long since it has grown silent, like the other horror, and I know not its thoughts or its intent.… And verily I know not if the thing that has come to us be one or several; nor if its avatar will rest complete with the three that summoned it forth into time, or be extended to others.

But these things, and much else, I shall soon know; for now, in turn, there is a shadow that follows mine, drawing ever closer. The air congeals and curdles with an unseen fear; and they that were our familiars have fled from the mansion; and the great marble women seem to tremble where they stand along the walls. But the horror that was Avyctes, and the second horror that was Oigos, have left me not, and neither do they tremble. And with eyes that are not eyes, they seem to brood and watch, waiting till I too shall become as they. And their stillness is more terrible than if they had rended me limb from limb. And there are strange voices in the wind, and alien roarings upon the sea; and the walls quiver like a thin veil in the black breath of remote abysses.

So, knowing that the time is brief, I have shut myself in the room of volumes and books and have written this account. And I have taken the bright triangular tablet, whose solution was our undoing, and have cast it from the window into the sea, hoping that none will find it after us. And now I must make an end, and enclose this writing in the sealed cylinder of orichalchum, and fling it forth to drift upon the wave. For the space between my shadow and the shadow of the horror is straitened momently.… and the space is no wider than the thickness of a wizard’s pen.

A NIGHT IN MALNÉANT

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

My sojourn in the city of Malnéant occurred during a period of my life no less dim and dubious than that city itself and the misty regions lying there about. I have no precise recollection of its locality, nor can I remember exactly when and how I came to visit it. But I had heard vaguely that such a place was situated along my route; and when I came to the fog-enfolded river that flows beside its walls, and heard beyond the river the mortuary tolling of many bells, I surmised that I was approaching Malnéant.

On reaching the gray, colossal bridge that crosses the river, I could have continued at will on other roads leading to remoter cities: but it seemed to me that I might as well enter Malnéant as any other place. And so it was that I set foot on the bridge of shadowy arches, under which the black waters flowed in stealthy division and were joined again in a silence as of Styx and Acheron.

That period of my life, I have said, was dim and dubious: all the more so, mayhap, because of my need for forgetfulness, my persistent and at times partially rewarded search for oblivion. And that which I needed to forget above all was the death of the lady Mariel, and the fact that I myself had slain her as surely as if I had done the deed with my own hand. For she had loved me with an affection deeper and purer and more stable than mine; and my changeable temper, my fits of cruel indifference or ferocious irritability, had broken her gentle heart. So it was that she had sought the anodyne of a lethal poison; and after she was laid to rest in the somber vaults of her ancestors, I had become a wanderer, followed and forever tortured by a belated remorse. For months, or years, I am uncertain which, I roamed from old-world city to city, heeding little where I went if only wine and the other agents of oblivion were available.… And thus I came, some while in my indefinite journeying, to the dim environs of Malnéant.

The sun (if ever there was a sun above this region) had been lost for I knew not how long in a sky of leaden vapors; the day was drear and sullen at best. But now, by the thickening of the shadows and the mist, I felt that evening must be near; and the bells I had heard, however heavy and

sepulchral their tolling, gave at least the assurance of prospective shelter for the night. So I crossed the long bridge and entered the grimly yawning gate with a quickening of my footsteps even if with no alacrity of spirit.

The dusk had gathered behind the gray walls, but there were few lights in the city. Few people were abroad, and these went upon their way with a sort of solemn haste, as if on some funereal errand that would permit no delay. The streets were narrow, the houses high, with overhanging balconies and heavily curtained or shuttered windows. All was very silent, except for the bells, which tolled recurrently, sometimes faint and far off, and sometimes with a loud and startling clangor that seemed to come almost from overhead.

As I plunged among the shadowy mansions, along the streets from which a visible twilight issued to envelop me, it seemed that I was going farther and farther away from my memories at every step. For this reason I did not at once inquire my way to a tavern but was content to lose myself more and more in the gray labyrinth of buildings, which grew vaguer and vaguer amid the ever-mounting darkness and fog, as if they were about to dissolve in oblivion.

I think that my soul would have been almost at peace with itself, if it had not been for the reiterant ringing of the bells, which were like all bells that toll for the repose of the dead, and therefore set me to remembering those that had rung for Mariel. But whenever they ceased, my thoughts would drift back with an indolent ease, a recovered security, to the all-surrounding vagueness…

I had no idea how far I had gone in Malnéant, nor how long I had roamed among those houses that hardly seemed as if they could be peopled by any but the sleeping or the dead. At last, however, I became aware that I was very tired, and bethought me of food and wine and a lodging for the night. But nowhere in my wanderings had I noticed the sign-board of an inn; so I resolved to ask the next passer-by for the desired direction.

As I have said before, there were few people abroad. Now, when I made up my mind to address one of them, it appeared that there was no one at all; and I walked onward through street after street in my futile search for a living face.

At length I met two women, clothed in gray that was cold and dim as the folds of the fog, and veiled withal, who were hurrying along with the same

funereal intentness I had perceived in all other denizens of that city. I made bold to accost them, asking if they could direct me to an inn.

Scarcely pausing or even turning their heads, they answered: “We cannot tell you. We are shroud-weavers, and we have been busy making a shroud for the lady Mariel.”

Now, at that name, which of all names in the world was the one I should least have expected or cared to hear, an unspeakable chill invaded my heart, and a dreadful dismay smote me like the breath of the tomb. It was indeed strange that in this dim city, so far in time and space from all I had fled to escape, a woman should have recently died who was also named Mariel. The coincidence appeared so sinister that an odd fear of the streets through which I had wandered was born suddenly in my soul. The name had evoked, with a more irrevocable fatality than the tolling of the bells, all that I had vainly wished to forget; and my memories were like living coals in my heart.

As I went onward, with paces that had become more hurried, more feverish than those of the people of Malnéant, I met two men, who were likewise dressed from head to foot in gray; and I asked of them the same question I had asked of the shroud-weavers.

“We cannot tell you,” they replied. “We are coffin-makers, and we have been busy making a coffin for the lady Mariel.”

As they spoke, and hastened on, the bells rang out again, this time very near at hand, with a more dismal and sepulchral menace in their leaden tolling. And everything about me, the tall and misty houses, the dark, indefinite streets, the rare and wraith-like figures, became as if part of the obscure confusion and fear and bafflement of a nightmare. Moment by moment, the coincidence on which I had stumbled appeared all too bizarre for belief, and I was troubled now by the monstrous and absurd idea that the Mariel I knew had only just died, and that this fantastic city was in some unsurmisable manner connected with her death. But this, of course, my reason rejected summarily, and I kept repeating to myself: “The Mariel of whom they speak is another Mariel.” And it irritated me beyond all measure that a thought so enormous and ludicrous should return when my logic had dismissed it.

I met no more people of whom to inquire my way. But at length, as I fought with my shadowy perplexity and my burning memories, I found that

I had paused beneath the weather-beaten sign of an inn, on which the lettering had been half effaced by time and the brown lichens. The building was obviously very old, like all the houses in Malnéant; its upper stories were lost in the swirling fog, except for a few furtive lights that glowed obscurely down; and a vague and musty odor of antiquity came forth to greet me as I mounted the steps and tried to open the ponderous door. But the door had been locked or bolted; so I began to pound upon it with my fists to attract the attention of those within.

After much delay, the door was opened slowly and grudgingly, and a cadaverous-looking individual peered forth, frowning with portentous gravity as he saw me.

"What do you desire?" he queried, in tones that were both brusk and solemn.

"A room for the night, and wine," I requested.

"We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms are occupied by people who have come to attend the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine in the house has been requisitioned for their use. You will have to go elsewhere."

He closed the door quickly upon me with the last words. I turned to resume my wanderings, and all that had troubled me before was now intensified a hundredfold. The gray mists and the grayer houses were full of the menace of memory: they were like traitorous tombs from which the cadavers of dead hours poured forth to assail me with envenomed fangs and talons. I cursed the hour when I had entered Malnéant, for it seemed to me now that in so doing I had merely completed a funereal, sinister circle through time, and had returned to the day of Mariel's death. And certainly, all my recollections of Mariel, of her final agony and her entombment, had assumed the frightful vitality of present things. But my reason still maintained, of course, that the Mariel who lay dead somewhere in Malnéant, and for whom all these obsequial preparations were being made, was not the lady whom I had loved, but another.

After threading streets that were even darker and narrower than those before traversed, I found a second inn, bearing a similar weather-beaten sign, and in all other respects very much like the first. The door was barred, and I knocked thereon with trepidation and was in no manner surprised

when a second individual with a cadaverous face informed me in tones of sepulchral solemnity:

“We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms have been taken by musicians and mourners who will serve at the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine has been reserved for their use.”

Now I began to dread the city about me with a manifold fear: for apparently the whole business of the people in Malnéant consisted of preparations for the funeral of this lady Mariel. And it began to be obvious that I must walk the streets of the city all night because of these same preparations. All at once, an overwhelming weariness was mingled with my nightmare terror and perplexity.

I had not long continued my peregrinations, after leaving the second inn, when the bells were tolled once more. For the first time, I found it possible to identify their source: they were in the spires of a great cathedral which loomed immediately before me through the fog. Some people were entering the cathedral, and a curiosity, which I knew to be both morbid and perilous, prompted me to follow them. Here, I somehow felt, I should be able to learn more regarding the mystery that tormented me.

All was dim within, and the light of many tapers scarcely served to illumine the vast nave and altar. Masses were being said by priests in black whose faces I could not see distinctly; and to me, their chanting was like words in a dream; and I could hear nothing, and nothing was plainly visible in all the place, except a bier of opulent fabrics on which there lay a motionless form in white. Flowers of many hues had been strewn upon the bier, and their fragrance filled the air with a drowsy languor, with an anodyne that seemed to drug my heart and brain. Such flowers had been cast on the bier of Mariel; and even thus, at her funeral, I had been overcome by a momentary dulling of the senses because of their perfume.

Dimly I became aware that someone was at my elbow. With eyes still intent on the bier, I asked:

“Who is it that lies yonder, for whom these masses are being said and these bells are rung?” And a slow, sepulchral voice replied:

“It is the lady Mariel, who died yesterday and who will be interred tomorrow in the vaults of her ancestors. If you wish, you may go forward and gaze upon her.”

So I went down the cathedral aisle, even to the side of the bier, whose opulent fabrics trailed on the cold flags. And the face of her who lay thereon, with a tranquil smile upon the lips, and tender shadows upon the shut eyelids, was the face of the Mariel I had loved and of none other. The tides of time were frozen in their flowing; and all that was or had been or could be, all of the world that existed aside from her, became as fading shadows; and even as once before (was it eons or instants ago?) my soul was locked in the marble hell of its supreme grief and regret. I could not move, I could not cry out nor even weep, for my very tears were turned to ice. And now I knew with a terrible certitude that this one event, the death of the lady Mariel, had drawn apart from all other happenings, had broken away from the sequence of time and had found for itself a setting of appropriate gloom and solemnity; or perhaps had even built around itself the whole enormous maze of that spectral city, in which to abide my destined return among the mists of a deceptive oblivion.

At length, with an awful effort of will, I turned my eyes away; and leaving the cathedral with steps that were both hurried and leaden, I sought to find an egress from the dismal labyrinth of Malnéant to the gate by which I had entered. But this was by no means easy, and I must have roamed for hours in alleys blind and stifling as tombs, and along the tortuous, self-reverting thoroughfares, ere I came to a familiar street and was able henceforward to direct my paces with something of surety. And a dull and sunless daylight was dawning behind the mists when I crossed the bridge and came again to the road that would lead me away from that fatal city.

Since then, I have wandered long and in many places. But never again have I cared to revisit those old-world realms of fog and mist, for fear that I should come once more to Malnéant, and find that its people are still busied with their preparations for the obsequies of the lady Mariel.

THE DEVOTEE OF EVIL

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

The old Larcom house was a mansion of considerable size and dignity, set among oaks and cypresses on the hill behind Auburn's Chinatown, in what had once been the aristocratic section of the village. At the time of which I write, it had been unoccupied for several years and had begun to present the signs of desolation and dilapidation which untenanted houses so soon display. The place had a tragic history and was believed to be haunted. I had never been able to procure any first-hand or precise accounts of the spectral manifestations that were accredited to it. But certainly it possessed all the necessary antecedents of a haunted house. The first owner, Judge Peter Larcom, had been murdered beneath its roof back in the seventies by a maniacal Chinese cook; one of his daughters had gone insane; and two other members of the family had died accidental deaths. None of them had prospered: their legend was one of sorrow and disaster.

Some later occupants, who had purchased the place from the one surviving son of Peter Larcom, had left under circumstances of inexplicable haste after a few months, moving permanently to San Francisco. They did not return even for the briefest visit; and beyond paying their taxes, they gave no attention whatever to the place. Everyone had grown to think of it as a sort of historic ruin, when the announcement came that it had been sold to Jean Averaud, of New Orleans.

My first meeting with Averaud was strangely significant, for it revealed to me, as years of acquaintance would not necessarily have done, the peculiar bias of his mind. Of course, I had already heard some odd rumors about him; his personality was too signal, his advent too mysterious, to escape the usual fabrication and mongering of village tales. I had been told that he was extravagantly rich, that he was a recluse of the most eccentric type, that he had made certain very singular changes in the inner structure of the old house; and last, but not least, that he lived with a beautiful mulatress who never spoke to anyone and who was believed to be his mistress as well as his housekeeper. The man himself had been described to

me by some as an unusual but harmless lunatic, and by others as an all-round Mephistopheles.

I had seen him several times before our initial meeting. He was a sallow, saturnine Creole, with the marks of race in his hollow cheeks and feverish eyes. I was struck by his air of intellect, and by the fiery fixity of his gaze—the gaze of a man who is dominated by one idea to the exclusion of all else. Some medieval alchemist, who believed himself to be on the point of attaining his objective after years of unrelenting research, might have looked as he did.

I was in the Auburn library one day when Averaud entered. I had taken a newspaper from one of the tables and was reading the details of an atrocious crime—the murder of a woman and her two infant children by the husband and father, who had locked his victims in a clothes-closet, after saturating their garments with oil. He had left the woman's apron-string caught in the shut door, with the end protruding, and had set fire to it like a fuse.

Averaud passed the table where I was reading. I looked up, and saw his glance at the headlines of the paper I held. A moment later he returned and sat down beside me, saying in a low voice:

"What interests me in a crime of that sort is the implication of unhuman forces behind it. Could any man, on his own initiative, have conceived and executed anything so gratuitously fiendish?"

"I don't know," I replied, somewhat surprised by the question and by my interrogator. "There are terrifying depths in human nature—more abhorrent than those of the jungle."

"I agree. But how could such impulses, unknown to the most brutal progenitors of man, have been implanted in his nature, unless through some ulterior agency?"

"You believe, then, in the existence of an evil force or entity—a Satan or an Ahriman?"

"I believe in evil—how can I do otherwise when I see its manifestations everywhere? I regard it as an all-controlling power; but I do not think that the power is personal in the sense of what we know as personality. A Satan? No. What I conceive is a sort of dark vibration, the radiation of a black sun, of a center of malignant eons—a radiation that can penetrate like any other

ray—and perhaps more deeply. But probably I don't make my meaning clear at all."

I protested that I understood him; but, after his burst of communicativeness, he seemed oddly disinclined to pursue the conversation. Evidently he had been prompted to address me; and no less evidently, he regretted having spoken with so much freedom. He arose; but before leaving, he said:

"I am Jean Averaud—perhaps you have heard of me. You are Philip Hastane, the novelist. I have read your books and I admire them. Come and see me sometime—we may have certain tastes in common."

Averaud's personality, the conception he had avowed, and the intense interest and value which he so obviously attached to these conceptions, made a singular impression on my mind, and I could not forget him. When, a few days later, I met him on the street and he repeated his invitation with a cordialness that was unfeignedly sincere, I could do no less than accept. I was interested, though not altogether attracted, by his bizarre, well-nigh morbid individuality, and was impelled by a desire to learn more concerning him. I sensed a mystery of no common order—a mystery with elements of the abnormal and the uncanny.

The grounds of the old Larcom place were precisely as I remembered them, though I had not found occasion to pass them for some time. They were a veritable tangle of Cherokee rose-vines, arbutus, lilac, ivy and crepe-myrtle, half overshadowed by the great cypresses and somber evergreen oaks. There was a wild, half-sinister charm about them—the charm of rampancy and ruin. Nothing had been done to put the place in order, and there were no outward repairs in the house itself, where the white paint of bygone years was being slowly replaced by mosses and lichens that flourished beneath the eternal umbrage of the trees. There were signs of decay in the roof and pillars of the front porch; and I wondered why the new owner, who was reputed to be so rich, had not already made the necessary restorations.

I raised the gargoyle-shaped knocker and let it fall with a dull, lugubrious clang. The house remained silent; and I was about to knock again, when the door opened slowly and I saw for the first time the mulatress of whom so many village rumors had reached me.

The woman was more exotic than beautiful, with fine, mournful eyes and bronze-colored features of a semi-negroid irregularity. Her figure, though, was truly perfect, with the curving lines of a lyre and the supple grace of some feline animal. When I asked for Jean Averaud, she merely smiled and made signs for me to enter. I surmised at once that she was dumb.

Waiting in the gloomy library to which she conducted me, I could not refrain from glancing at the volumes with which the shelves were congested. They were an ungodly jumble of tomes that dealt with anthropology, ancient religions, demonology, modern science, history, psychoanalysis and ethics. Interspersed with these were a few romances and volumes of poetry. Beausobre's monograph on Manichaeism was flanked with Byron and Poe; and *Les Fleurs du Mal* jostled a late treatise on chemistry.

Averaud entered, after several minutes, apologizing profusely for his delay. He said that he had been in the midst of certain labors when I came; but he did not specify the nature of these labors. He looked even more hectic and fiery-eyed than when I had seen him last. He was patently glad to see me, and eager to talk.

"You have been looking at my books," he observed immediately. "Though you might not think so at first glance, on account of their seeming diversity, I have selected them all with a single object: the study of evil in all its aspects, ancient, medieval and modern. I have traced it in the religions and demonologies of all peoples; and, more than this, in human history itself. I have found it in the inspiration of poets and romancers who have dealt with the darker impulses, emotion and acts of man. Your novels have interested me for this reason: you are aware of the baneful influences which surround us, which so often sway or actuate us. I have followed the working of these agencies even in chemical reactions, in the growth and decay of trees, flowers, minerals. I feel that the processes of physical decomposition, as well as the similar mental and moral processes, are due entirely to them.

"In brief, I have postulated a monistic evil, which is the source of all death, deterioration, imperfection, pain, sorrow, madness and disease. This evil, so feebly counteracted by the powers of good, allures and fascinates me above all things. For a long time past, my life-work has been to

ascertain its true nature, and trace it to its fountain-head. I am sure that somewhere in space there is the center from which all evil emanates."

He spoke with a wild air of excitement, of morbid and semimaniacal intensity. His obsession convinced me that he was more or less unbalanced; but there was an unholy logic in the development of his ideas; and I could not but recognize a certain disordered brilliancy and range of intellect.

Scarcely waiting for me to reply, he continued his monologue:

"I have learned that certain localities and buildings, certain arrangements of natural or artificial objects, are more favorable to the reception of evil influences than others. The laws that determine the degree of receptivity are still obscure to me; but at least I have verified the fact itself. As you know, there are houses or neighborhoods notorious for a succession of crimes or misfortunes; and there are also articles, such as certain jewels, whose possession is accompanied by disaster. Such places and things are receivers of evil… I have a theory, however, that there is always more or less interference with the direct flow of the malignant force; and that pure, absolute evil has never yet been manifested.

"By the use of some device which would create a proper field or form a receiving station, it should be possible to evoke this absolute evil. Under such conditions, I am sure that the dark vibration would become a visible and tangible thing, comparable to light or electricity." He eyed me with a gaze that was disconcertingly exigent. Then:

"I will confess that I have purchased this old mansion and its grounds mainly on account of their baleful history. The place is unusually liable to the influences of which I have spoken. I am now at work on an apparatus by means of which, when it is perfected, I hope to manifest in their essential purity the radiations of malign force."

At this moment, the mulatress entered and passed through the room on some household errand. I thought that she gave Averaud a look of maternal tenderness, watchfulness and anxiety. He, on his part seemed hardly to be aware of her presence, so engrossed was he in the strange ideas and the stranger project he had been expounding. However, when she had gone, he remarked:

"That is Fifine, the one human being who is really attached to me. She is mute, but highly intelligent and affectionate. All my people, an old Louisiana family, are long departed…and my wife is doubly dead to me." A

spasm of obscure pain contracted his features, and vanished. He resumed his monologue; and at no future time did he again refer to the presumably tragic tale at which he had hinted: a tale in which, I sometimes suspect, were hidden the seeds of the strange moral and mental perversion which he was to manifest more and more.

I took my leave, after promising to return for another talk. Of course, I considered now that Averaud was a madman; but his madness was of a most uncommon and picturesque variety. It seemed significant that he should have chosen me for a confidant. All others who met him found him uncommunicative and taciturn to an extreme degree. I suppose he had felt the ordinary human need of unburdening himself to someone; and had selected me as the only person in the neighborhood who was potentially sympathetic.

I saw him several times during the month that followed. He was indeed a strange psychological study; and I encouraged him to talk without reserve —though such encouragement was hardly necessary. There was much that he told me—a strange medley of the scientific and the mystic. I assented tactfully to all that he said, but ventured to point out the possible dangers of his evocative experiments, if they should prove successful. To this, with the fervor of an alchemist or a religious devotee, he replied that it did not matter—that he was prepared to accept any and all consequences.

More than once he gave me to understand that his invention was progressing favorably. And one day he said, with abruptness:

“I will show you my mechanism, if you care to see it.” I protested my eagerness to view the invention, and he led me forthwith into a room to which I had not been admitted before. The chamber was large, triangular in form, and tapestried with curtains of some sullen black fabric. It had no windows. Clearly, the internal structure of the house had been changed in making it; and all the queer village tales, emanating from carpenters who had been hired to do the work, were now explained. Exactly in the center of the room, there stood on a low tripod of brass—the apparatus of which Averaud had so often spoken.

The contrivance was quite fantastic, and presented the appearance of some new, highly complicated musical instrument. I remember that there were many wires of varying thickness, stretched on a series of concave sounding-boards of some dark, unlustrous metal; and above these, there

depended from three horizontal bars a number of square, circular and triangular gongs. Each of these appeared to be made of a different material; some were bright as gold, or translucent as jade; others were black and opaque as jet. A small hammerlike instrument hung opposite each gong, at the end of a silver wire.

Averaud proceeded to expound the scientific basis of his mechanism. The vibrational properties of the gongs, he said, were designed to neutralize with their sound-pitch all other cosmic vibrations than those of evil. He dwelt at much length on this extravagant theorem, developing it in a fashion oddly lucid. He ended his peroration:

"I need one more gong to complete the instrument; and this I hope to invent very soon. The triangular room, draped in black, and without windows, forms the ideal setting for my experiment. Apart from this room, I have not ventured to make any change in the house or its grounds, for fear of deranging some propitious element or collocation of elements."

More than ever, I thought that he was mad. And, though he had professed on many occasions to abhor the evil which he planned to evoke, I felt an inverted fanaticism in his attitude. In a less scientific age he would have been a devil-worshipper, a partaker in the abominations of the Black Mass; or would have given himself to the study and practice of sorcery. His was a religious soul that had failed to find good in the scheme of things; and lacking it, was impelled to make of evil itself an object of secret reverence.

"I fear that you think me insane," he observed in a sudden flash of clairvoyance. "Would you like to watch an experiment? Even though my invention is not completed, I may be able to convince you that my design is not altogether the fantasy of a disordered brain."

I consented. He turned on the lights in the dim room. Then he went to an angle of the wall and pressed a hidden spring or switch. The wires on which the tiny hammers were strung began to oscillate, till each of the hammers touched lightly its companion gong. The sound they made was dissonant and disquieting to the last degree—a diabolic percussion unlike anything I have ever heard, and exquisitely painful to the nerves. I felt as if a flood of finely broken glass was pouring into my ears.

The swinging of the hammers grew swifter and heavier; but, to my surprise, there was no corresponding increase of loudness in the sound. On the contrary, the clangor became slowly muted, till it was no more than an

undertone which seemed to be coming from an immense depth or distance —an undertone still full of disquietude and torment, like the sobbing of far-off winds in hell, or the murmur of demonian fires on coasts of eternal ice.

Said Averaud at my elbow:

"To a certain extent, the combined notes of the gongs are beyond human hearing in their pitch. With the addition of the final gong, even less sound will be audible."

While I was trying to digest this difficult idea, I noticed a partial dimming of the light above the tripod and its weird apparatus. A vertical shaft of faint shadow, surrounded by a still fainter penumbra, was forming in the air. The tripod itself, and the wires, gongs and hammers, were now a trifle indistinct, as if seen through some obscuring veil. The central shaft and its penumbra seemed to widen; and looking down at the flood, where the outer adumbration, conforming to the room's outline, crept toward the walls, I saw that Averaud and myself were now within its ghostly triangle.

At the same time there surged upon me an intolerable depression, together with a multitude of sensations which I despair of conveying in language. My very sense of space was distorted and deformed as if some unknown dimension had somehow been mingled with those familiar to us. There was a feeling of dreadful and measureless descent, as if the floor were sinking beneath me into some nether pit; and I seemed to pass beyond the room in a torrent of swirling, hallucinative images, visible but invisible, felt but intangible, and more awful, more accurst than that hurricane of lost souls beheld by Dante.

Down, down, I appeared to go, in the bottomless and phantom hell that was impinging upon reality. Death, decay, malignity, madness, gathered in the air and pressed me down like Satanic incubi in that ecstatic horror of descent. I felt that there were a thousand forms, a thousand faces about me, summoned from the gulfs of perdition. And yet I saw nothing but the white face of Averaud, stamped with a frozen and abominable rapture as he fell beside me.

Like a dreamer who forces himself to awaken, he began to move away from me. I seemed to lose sight of him for a moment in the cloud of nameless, immaterial horrors that threatened to take on the further horror of substance. Then I realized that Averaud had turned off the switch, and that the oscillating hammers had ceased to beat on those infernal gongs. The

double shaft of shadow faded in mid-air, the burden of terror and despair lifted from my nerves and I no longer felt the damnable hallucination of nether space and descent.

"My God!" I cried. "What was it?"

Averaud's look was full of a ghastly, gloating exultation as he turned to me.

"You saw and felt it, then?" he queried—"that vague, imperfect manifestation of the perfect evil which exists somewhere in the cosmos? I shall yet call it forth in its entirety, and know the black, infinite, reverse raptures which attend its epiphany."

I recoiled from him with an involuntary shudder. All the hideous things that had swarmed upon me beneath the cacophonous beating of those accursed gongs drew near again for an instant; and I looked with fearful vertigo into hells of perversity and corruption. I saw an inverted soul, despairing of good, which longed for the baleful ecstasies of perdition. No longer did I think him merely mad: for I knew the thing which he sought and could attain; and I remembered, with a new significance, that line of Baudelaire's poem—"The hell wherein my heart delights."

Averaud was unaware of my revulsion, in his dark rhapsody. When I turned to leave, unable to bear any longer the blasphemous atmosphere of that room, and the sense of strange depravity which emanated from its owner, he pressed me to return as soon as possible.

"I think," he exulted, "that all will be in readiness before long. I want you to be present in the hour of my triumph."

I do not know what I said, nor what excuses I made to get away from him. I longed to assure myself that a world of unblasted sunlight and undefiled air could still exist. I went out; but a shadow followed me; and execrable faces leered or mowed from the foliage as I left the cypress-shaded grounds.

For days afterward I was in a condition verging upon neurotic disorder. No one could come as close as I had been to the primal effluence of evil and go thence unaffected. Shadowy noisome cobwebs draped themselves on all my thoughts, and presences of unlineamented fear, of shapeless horror, crouched in the half-lit corners of my mind but would never fully declare themselves. An invisible gulf, bottomless as Malebolge, seemed to yawn before me wherever I went.

Presently, though, my reason reasserted itself, and I wondered if my sensations in the black triangular room had not been wholly a matter of suggestion or auto-hypnosis. I asked myself if it were credible that a cosmic force of the sort postulated by Averaud could really exist; or, granting it existed, could be evoked by any man through the absurd intermediation of a musical device. The nervous terrors of my experience faded a little in memory; and, though a disturbing doubt still lingered, I assured myself that all I had felt was of purely subjective origin. Even then, it was with supreme reluctance, with an inward shrinking only to be overcome by violent resolve, that I returned to visit Averaud once more.

For an even longer period than usual, no one answered my knock. Then there were hurrying footsteps, and the door was opened abruptly by Fifine. I knew immediately that something was amiss, for her face wore a look of unnatural dread and anxiety, and her eyes were wide, with the whites showing blankly, as if she gazed upon horrific things. She tried to speak, and made that ghastly inarticulate sound which the mute is able to make on occasion as she plucked my sleeve and drew me after her along the somber hall to the triangular room.

The door was open; and as I approached it, I heard a low, dissonant, snarling murmur, which I recognized as the sound of the gongs. It was like the voice of all the souls in a frozen hell, uttered by lips congealing slowly toward the ultimate torture of silence. It sank and sank till it seemed to be issuing from pits below the nadir.

Fifine shrank back on the threshold, imploring me with a pitiful glance to precede her. The lights were all turned on and Averaud, clad in a strange medieval costume, in a black gown and cap such as Faustus might have worn, stood near the percussive mechanism. The hammers were all beating with a frenzied rapidity; and the sound became still lower and tenser as I approached. Averaud did not seem to see me: his eyes, abnormally dilated, and flaming with infernal luster like those of one possessed, were fixed upon something in mid-air.

Again the soul-congealing hideousness, the sense of eternal falling, of myriad harpy-like incumbent horrors, rushed upon me as I looked and saw. Vaster and stronger than before, a double column of triangular shadow had materialized and was becoming more and more distinct. It swelled, it darkened, it enveloped the gong-apparatus and towered to the ceiling. The

double column grew solid and opaque as ebony; and the face of Averaud, who was standing well within the broad penumbral shadow, became dim as if seen through a film of Stygian water.

I must have gone utterly mad for a while. I remember only a teeming delirium of things too frightful to be endured by a sane mind, that peopled the infinite gulf of hell-born illusion into which I sank with the hopeless precipitancy of the damned. There was a sickness inexpressible, a vertigo of redeemless descent, a pandemonium of ghoulish phantoms that reeled and swayed about the column of malign omnipotent force which presided over all. Averaud was only one more phantom in this delirium, when with arms outstretched in his perverse adoration, he stepped toward the inner column and passed into it till he was lost to view. And Fifine was another phantom when she ran by me to the wall and turned off the switch that operated those demoniacal hammers.

As one who re-emerges from a swoon, I saw the fading of the dual pillar, till the light was no longer sullied by any tinge of that satanic radiation. And where it had been, Averaud still stood beside the baleful instrument he had designed. Erect and rigid he stood, in a strange immobility; and I felt an incredulous horror, a chill awe, as I went forward and touched him with a faltering hand. For that which I saw and touched was no longer a human being but an ebon statue, whose face and brow and fingers were black as the Faust-like raiment or the sullen curtains. Charred as by sable fire, or frozen by black cold, the features bore the eternal ecstasy and pain of Lucifer in his ultimate hell of ice. For an instant, the supreme evil which Averaud had worshipped so madly, which he had summoned from the vaults of incalculable space, had made him one with itself; and passing, it had left him petrified into an image of its own essence. The form that I touched was harder than marble; and I knew that it would endure to all time as a testimony of the infinite Medusean power that is death and corruption and darkness.

Fifine had now thrown herself at the feet of the image and was clasping its insensible knees. With her frightful muted moaning in my ears, I went forth for the last time from that chamber and from that mansion. Vainly, through delirious months and madness-ridden years, I have tried to shake off the infrangible obsession of my memories. But there is a fatal numbness in my brain as if it too had been charred and blackened a little in that

moment of overpowering nearness to the dark ray of the black statue that was Jean Averaud, the impress of awful and forbidden things has been set like an everlasting seal.

THE WILLOW LANDSCAPE

***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933)**

The picture was more than five hundred years old; and time had not changed its colors, unless to touch them with the mellow softness of ancient hours, with the gathering morbidezza of bygone things. It had been painted by a great artist of the Sung dynasty, on silk of the finest weave, and mounted on rollers of ebony tipped with silver. For twelve generations it had been one of the most cherished possessions of the forefathers of Shih Liang. And it was equally cherished by Shih Liang himself, who, like all his ancestors, was a scholar, a poet, and a lover of both art and nature. Often, in his dreamiest or most meditative moods, he would unroll the painting and gaze upon its idyllic loveliness with the feeling of one who retires to the seclusion and remoteness of a mountain-warded valley. It consoled him in a measure for the bustle and blare and intrigue of the imperial court, where he held an official post of no small honor; since he was not altogether native to such things and would have preferred, like the olden sages, the philosophic peace of a leaf-embowered hermitage.

The picture represented a pastoral scene of the most ideal and visionary beauty. In the background arose lofty mountains rendered vague by the slow withdrawal of morning mists; in the foreground there ran a little stream, descending in mimic turbulence to a tranquil lake, and crossed on its way by a rustic bridge of bamboo, more charming than if it were made of royal lacquer. Beyond the stream and around the lake were willows of vernal green more lovely and delicious than anything that was ever beheld except in vision or memory. Incomparable was their grace, ineffable their waving: they were like the willows of Shou Shan, the Taoist Paradise; and they trailed their foliage as leaning women trail their unbound hair. And partly hidden among them was a tiny hut; and a maiden dressed in peony pink and white was crossing the little bamboo bridge. But somehow the picture was more than a painting, was more than a veritable scene: it possessed the enchantment of far-off things for which the heart has longed in vain, of years and of places that are lost beyond recall. Surely the artist

had mingled with its hues the diviner iris of dream or of retrospect, and the wine-sweet tears of a nostalgia long denied.

Shih Liang felt that he knew the landscape more intimately than any actual scene. Each time that he gazed upon it, his sensations were those of a returning wanderer. It became to him the cool and sequestered retreat in which he found a never-failing refuge from the weariness of his days. And though he was of an ascetic turn and had never married nor sought the company of women, the presence of the peony maiden on the bridge was by no means exceptionable: in fact, her tiny figure, with its more than mortal charm, was somehow an essential part of the composition and was no less important to its perfection than the stream, the willows, the lake, and the far-off mountains with their riven veils of mist. And she seemed to companion him in the visits and sojournings of reverie, when he would imagine himself repairing to the little hut or roaming beneath the delicate foliage.

In truth, Shih Liang had need of such refuge and of such companionship, illusory though they were. For, aside from his younger brother, Po Lung, a boy of sixteen, he was alone and without living relatives or comrades; and the fortunes of the family, declining through several generations, had left him the heritor of many debts and little cash or property, except a number of priceless art-treasures. His life was increasingly sad, and oppressed by ill-health and poverty; for much of the stipend from his secretarial post at the court was necessarily devoted to the canceling of inherited obligations; and the remainder was barely enough for his own sustenance and the education of his brother.

Shih Liang was approaching middle-age; and his honorable heart was rejoicing over the payment of the last family debt, when there came a fresh stroke of misfortune. Through no fault or remissness of his own, but the machinations of an envious fellow-scholar, Shih Liang was suddenly deprived of his position and found himself without means of support. No other position offered itself; for a certain amount of unmerited disgrace was attached to the imperial dismissal. In order to procure the necessities of life, and continue his brother’s education, Shih Liang was now forced to sell one by one many of the irreplaceable heirlooms, the antique carvings of jade and ivory, the rare porcelains and paintings of the ancestral collection. This he did with extreme reluctance, with a sense of utter shame and profanation,

such as could be felt only by a true lover of such things, and by one whose very soul was consecrated to the past and to the memory of his fathers.

The days and years went by, the collection dwindled piece by piece; and the time drew near when the studies of Po Lung would be completed, when he would be a scholar versed in all the classics and eligible for a position of both honor and profit. But, alas! The porcelains and lacquers, the jades and ivories had all been sold; and the paintings were likewise gone, all except the willow landscape so dearly cherished by Shih Liang.

A mortal and inassuageable sorrow, a dismay that was colder than the chill of death itself, entered the heart of Shih Liang when he realized the truth. It seemed to him that he could no longer live if he should sell the picture. But if he did not sell it, how could he complete the fraternal duty which he owed to Po Lung. There was but one possible course; and he sent word at once to the Mandarin Mung Li, a connoisseur who had purchased other pieces of the old collection, telling him that the willow picture was now for sale.

Mung Li had long coveted this picture. He came in person, his eyes gleaming in his fat face with the avidity of a collector who scents a bargain; and the transaction was soon concluded. The money was paid immediately; but Shih Liang begged leave to retain the picture for another day before delivering it to the mandarin. And knowing that Shih Liang was a man of honor, Mung Li assented readily to this request.

When the mandarin had gone, Shih Liang unrolled the landscape and hung it on the wall. His stipulation to Mung Li bad been prompted by the irresistible feeling that he must have one more hour of communion with the beloved scene, must repair once more in reverie to its inviolate retreat. After that, he would be as one without a home or a sanctuary; for he knew that in all the world there was nothing that could take the place of the willow picture or afford a like asylum for his dreams.

The mellowing rays of earliest eventide were sifted upon the silk volumen where it hung on the bare wall; but for Shih Liang, the painting was steeped in a light of supernal enchantment, was touched by more than the muted splendor of the falling sun. And it seemed to him that never before had the foliage been so tender with immortal spring, or the mist about the mountain so glamorous with eternally dissolving opal, or the maiden upon the rustic bridge so lovely with unfading youth. And

somehow, by an unaccountable sorcery of perspective, the painting itself was larger and deeper than of yore, and had mysteriously assumed even more of reality, or the illusion of an actual place.

With unshed tears in his heart, like an exile who bids farewell to his natal valley, Shih Liang enjoyed the sorrowful luxury of looking upon the willow picture for the last time. Even as on a thousand former occasions, his fancy strayed beneath the branches and beside the mere, it inhabited the tiny hut whose roof was so tantalizingly revealed and concealed, it peered at the mountaintops from behind the trailing foliage, or paused upon the bridge to converse with the peony maiden.

And now there happened a strange and inexplicable thing. Though the sun had gone down while Shih Liang continued to gaze and dream, and a twilight had gathered in the room, the picture itself was no less plain and luminous than before, as if it were lit by another sun than that of contemporary time and space. And the landscape had grown even larger, till it seemed to Shih Liang that he was looking through an open door on the veritable scene itself.

Then, as bewilderment assailed him, he heard a whisper that was not an actual voice, but which seemed to emanate from the landscape and become audible as a thought in his inmost mind. And the whisper said:

“Because you have loved me so long and so dearly, and because your heart is native here but alien to all the world beside, it is now permitted that I should become for you the inviolable refuge of which you have dreamed, and a place wherein you can wander and abide forever.”

So, with the surpassing joy of one whose fondest vision has been verified, the rapture of one who inherits the heaven of his reverie, Shih Liang passed from the twilight room into the morning picture. And the ground was soft with a flower-embroidered grass beneath his heel; and the leaves of the willows murmured in an April wind that blew from long ago; and he saw the door of the half-hidden hut as he had never seen it before except in fancy; and the peony maiden smiled and answered his greeting when he approached her; and her voice was like the speech of the willows and the blossoms.

The disappearance of Shih Liang was a matter of brief and passing concern to those who had known him. It was readily believed that his

financial sorrows had driven him to suicide, probably by drowning in the great river that ran athwart the capital.

Po Lung, having received the money left by his brother from the sale of the last painting, was enabled to finish his education; and the willow landscape, which had been found hanging on the wall of Shih Liang's abode, was duly claimed by the Mandarin Mung Li, its purchaser.

Mung Li was delighted with his acquisition; but there was one detail which puzzled him considerably when he unrolled the volumen and examined it. He could remember only one figure, a maiden in pink and white, on the little bamboo bridge; and now there were two figures! Mung Li inspected the second figure with much curiosity, and was more than surprised when he noted that it had a singular resemblance to Shih Liang. But it was very tiny, like that of the maiden; and his eyes were dim from peering at so many porcelains and lacquers and paintings; so he could not be entirely sure. At any rate, the picture was very old; and he must have been mistaken about the number of the figures. However, it was undeniably peculiar.

Mung Li might have thought the matter still stranger, if he had looked more often at the painting. He might have found that the peony maiden and the person who resembled Shih Liang were sometimes engaged in other diversions than that of merely passing the time of day on the bamboo bridge!

THE EMPIRE OF NECROMANCERS

***Weird Tales*, September 1934**

The legend of Mmatmuor and Sodosma shall arise only in the latter cycles of Earth, when the glad legends of the prime have been forgotten. Before the time of its telling, many epochs shall have passed away, and the seas shall have fallen in their beds, and new continents shall have come to birth. Perhaps, in that day, it will serve to beguile for a little the black weariness of a dying race, grown hopeless of all but oblivion. I tell the tale as men shall tell it in Zothique, the last continent, beneath a dim sun and sad heavens where the stars come out in terrible brightness before eventide.

I

Mmatmuor and Sodosma were necromancers who came from the dark isle of Naat, to practise their baleful arts in Tinarath, beyond the shrunken seas. But they did not prosper in Tinarath: for death was deemed a holy thing by the people of that gray country; and the nothingness of the tomb was not lightly to be desecrated; and the raising up of the dead by necromancy was held in abomination.

So, after a short interval, Mmatmuor and Sodosma were driven forth by the anger of the inhabitants, and were compelled to flee toward Cincor, a desert of the south, which was peopled only by the bones and mummies of a race that the pestilence had slain in former time.

The land into which they went lay drear and leprous and ashen below the huge, ember-colored sun. Its crumbling rocks and deathly solitudes of sand would have struck terror to the hearts of common men; and, since they had been thrust out in that barren place without food or sustenance, the plight of the sorcerers might well have seemed a desperate one. But, smiling secretly, with the air of conquerors who tread the approaches of a long-coveted realm, Sodosma and Mmatmuor walked steadily on into Cincor.

Unbroken before them, through fields devoid of trees and grass, and across the channels of dried-up rivers, there ran the great highway by which travelers had gone formerly betweea Cincor and Tinarath. Here they met no

living thing; but soon they came to the skeletons of a horse and its rider, lying full in the road, and wearing still the sumptuous harness and raiment which they had worn in the flesh. And Mmatmuor aad Sodosma paused before the piteous bones, on which no shred of corruption remained; and they smiled evilly at each other.

"The steed shall be yours," said Mmatmuor, "since you are a little the elder of us two, and are thus entitled to precedence; and the rider shall serve us both and be the first to acknowledge fealty to us in Cincor."

Then, in the ashy sand by the wayside, they drew a threefold circle; and standing together at its center, they performed the abominable rites that compel the dead to arise from tranquil nothingness and obey henceforward, in all things, the dark will of the necromancer. Afterward they sprinkled a pinch of magic powder on the nostril-holes of the man and the horse; and the white bones, creaking mournfully, rose up from where they had lain and stood in readiness to serve their masters.

So, as had been agreed between them, Sodosma mounted the skeleton steed and took up the jeweled reins, and rode in an evil mockery of Death on his pale horse; while Mmatmuor trudged on beside him, leaning lightly on an ebon staff; and the skeleton of the man, with its rich raiment flapping loosely, followed behind the two like a servitor.

After a while, in the gray waste, they found the remnant of another horse and rider, which the jackals had spared and the sun had dried to the leanness of old mummies. These also they raised up from death; and Mmatmuor bestrode the withered charger; and the two magicians rode on in state, like errant emperors, with a lich and a skeleton to attend them. Other bones and charnel remnants of men and beasts, to which they came anon, were duly resurrected in like fashion; so that they gathered to themselves an everswelling train in their progress through Cincor.

Along the way, as they neared Yethlyreom, which had been the capital, they found numerous tombs and necropoli, inviolate still after many ages, and containing swathed mummies that had scarcely withered in death. All these they raised up and called from sepulchral night to do their bidding. Some they commanded to sow and till the desert fields and hoist water from the sunken wells; others they left at diverse tasks, such as the mummies had performed in life. The century-long silence was broken by the noise and tumult of myriad activities; and the lank liches of weavers toiled at their

shuttles; and the corpses of plowmen followed their furrows behind carrion oxen.

Weary with their strange journey and their oft-repeated incantations, Mmatmuor and Sodosma saw before them at last, from a desert hill, the lofty spires and fair, unbroken domes of Yethlyreom, steeped in the darkening stagnant blood of ominous sunset.

"It is a goodly land," said Mmatmuor, "and you and I will share it between us, and hold dominion over all its dead, and be crowned as emperors on the morrow in Yethlyreom."

"Aye," replied Sodosma, "for there is none living to dis pute us here; and those that we have summoned from the tomb shall move and breathe only at our dictation, and may not rebel against us."

So, in the blood-red twilight that thickened with purple, they entered Yethlyreom and rode on among the lofty, lampless mansions, and installed themselves with their grisly retinue in that stately and abandoned palace, where the dynasty of Nimboth emperors had reigned for two thousand years with dominion over Cincor.

In the dusty golden halls, they lit the empty lamps of onyx by means of their cunning sorcery, and supped on royal viands, provided from past years, which they evoked in like manner. Ancient and imperial wines were poured for them in moonstone cups by the fleshless hands of their servitors; and they drank and feasted and revelled in fantasmagoric pomp, deferring till the morrow the resurrectiom of those who lay dead in Yethlyreom.

They rose betimes, in the dark crimson dawn, from the opulent palace-beds in which they had slept; for much remained to be done. Everywhere in that forgotten city, they went busily to and fro, working their spells on the people that had died in the last year of the pest and had lain unburied. And having accomplished this, they passed beyond Yethlyreom into that other city of high tombs and mighty mausoleums, in which lay the Nimboth emperors and the more consequential citizens and nobles of Cincor.

Here they bade their skeleton slaves to break in the sealed doors with hammers; and then, with their sinful, tyrannous incantations, they called forth the imperial mummies, even to the eldest of the dynasty, all of whom came walking stiffly, with lightless eyes, in rich swathings sewn with flame-bright jewels. And also, later, they brought forth to a semblance of life many generations of courtiers and dignitaries.

Moving in solemn pageant, with dark and haughty and hollow faces, the dead emperors and empresses of Cincor made obeisance to Mmatmuor and Sodosma, and attended them like a train of captives through all the streets of Yethlyreom. Afterward, in the immense throne-room of the palace, the necromancers mounted the high double throne, where the rightful rulers had sat with their consorts. Amid the assembled emperors, in gorgeous and funereal state, they were invested with sovereignty by the sere hands of the mummy of Hestaiyon, earliest of the Nimboth line, who had ruled in half-mythic years. Then all the descendants of Hestaiyon, crowding the room in a great throng, acclaimed with toneless, echo-like voices the dominion of Mmatmuor and Sodosma.

Thus did the outcast necromancers find for themselves an empire and a subject people in the desolate, barren land where the men of Tinarath had driven them forth to perish. Reignhg supreme over all the dead of Cincor, by virtue of their malign magic, they exercised a baleful despotism. Tribute was borne to them by fleshless porters from outlying realms; and plague-eaten corpses, and tall mummies scented with mortuary balsams, went to and fro upon their errands in Yethlyreom, or heaped before their greedy eyes, fmm inexhaustible vaults, the cobweb-blackened gold and dusty gems of antique time.

Dead laborers made their palace-gardens to bloom with long-perished flowers; liches and skeletons toiled for them in the mines, or reared superb, fantastic towers to the dying sun. Chamberlains and princes of old time were their cupbearers, and stringed instruments were plucked for their delight by the slim hands of empresses with golden hair that had come forth untarnished from the night of the tomb. Those that were fairest, whom the plague and the worm had not ravaged overmuch, they took for their lemans and made to serve their necrophilic lust.

II

In all things, the people of Cincor performed the actions of life at the will of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. They spoke, they moved, they ate and drank as in life. They heard and saw and felt with a similitude of the senses that had been theirs before death; but their brains were enthralled by a dreadful necromancy. They recalled but dimly their former existence; and

the state to which they had been summoned was empty and troublous and shadow-like. Their blood ran chill and sluggish, mingled with water of Lethe; and the vapors of Lethe clouded their eyes.

Dumbly they obeyed the dictates of their tyrannous lords, without rebellion or protest, but filled with a vague, illimitable weariness such as the dead must know, when having drunk of eternal sleep, they are called back once more to the bitterness of mortal being. They knew no passion or desire, or delight, only the black languor of their awakening from Lethe, and a gray, ceaseless longing to return to that interrupted slumber.

Youngest and last of the Nimboth emperors was Illeiro, who had died in the first month of the plague, and had lain in his high-built mausoleum for two hundred years before the coming of the necromancers.

Raised up with his people and his fathers to attend the tyrants, Illeiro had resumed the emptiness of existence without question and had felt no surprise. He had accepted his own resurrection and that of his ancestors as one accepts the indignities and marvels of a dream. He knew that he had come back to a faded sun, to a hollow and spectral world, to an order of things in which his place was merely that of an obedient shadow. But at first he was troubled only, like the others, by a dim weariness and pale hunger for the lost oblivion.

Drugged by the magic of his overlords, weak from the age-long nullity of death, he beheld like a somnambulist the enormities to which his fathers were subjected. Yet, somehow, after many days, a feeble spark awoke in the sodden twilight of his mind.

Like something lost and irretrievable, beyond prodigious gulfs, he recalled the pomp of his reign in Yethlyreom, and the golden pride and exultation that had been his in youth. And recalling it, he felt a vague stirring of revolt, a ghostly resentment against the magicians who had haled him forth to this calamitous mockery of life. Darkly he began to grieve for his fallen state, and the mournful plight of his ancestors and his people.

Day by day, as a cup-bearer in the halls where he had ruled aforetime, Illeiro saw the doings of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. He saw their caprices of cruelty and lust, their growing drunkenness and gluttony. He watched them wallow in their necromantic luxury, and become lax with indolence, gross with indulgence. They neglected the study of their art, they forgot many of their spells. But still they ruled, mighty and formidable; and, lolling on

couches of purple and rose, they planned to lead an army of the dead against Tinarath.

Dreaming of conquest, and of vaster necromancies, they grew fat and slothful as worms that have installed themselves in a charnel rich with corruption. And pace by pace with their laxness and tyranny, the fire of rebellion mounted in the shadowy heart of Illeiro, like a flame that struggles with Lethean damps. And slowly, with the waxing of his wrath, there returned to him something of the strength and firmness that had been his in life. Seeing the turpitude of the oppressors, and knowing the wrong that had been done to the helpless dead, he heard in his brain the clamor of stifled voices demanding vengeance.

Among his fathers, through the palace-halls of Yethlyreom, Illeiro moved silently at the bidding of the masters, or stood awaiting their command. He poured in their cups of onyx the amber vintages, brought by wizardry from hills beneath a younger sun; he submitted to their contumelies and insults. And night by night he watched them nod in their drunkenness, till they fell asleep, flushed and gross, amid their arrogated splendor.

There was little speech among the living dead; and son and father, daughter and mother, lover and beloved, went to and fro without sign of recognition, making no comment on their evil lot. But at last, one midnight, when the tyrants lay in slumber, and the flames wavered in the necromantic lamps, Illeiro took counsel with Hestaiyon, his eldest ancestor, who had been famed as a great wizard in fable and was reputed to have known the secret lore of antiquity.

Hestaiyon stood apart from the others, in a corner of the shadowy hall. He was brown and withered in his crumbling mummy-cloths; and his lightless obsidian eyes appeared to gaze still upon nothingness. He seemed not to have heard the questions of Illeiro; but at length, in a dry, rustling whisper, he responded:

“I am old, and the night of the sepulcher was long, and I have forgotten much. Yet, groping backward across the void of death, it may be that I shall retrieve something of my former wisdom; and between us we shall devise a mode of deliverance.” And Hestaiyon searched among the shreds of memory, as one who reaches into a place where the worm has been and the

hidden archives of old time have rotted in their covers; till at last he remembered, and said:

"I recall that I was once a mighty wizard; and among other things, I knew the spells of necromancy; but employed them not, deeming their use and the raising up of the dead an abhorrent act. Also, I possessed other knowledge; and perhaps, among the remnants of that ancient lore, there is something which may serve to guide us now. For I recall a dim, dubitable prophecy, made in the primal years, at the founding of Yethlyreom and the empire of Cincor. The prophecy was, that an evil greater than death would befall the emperors and the people of Cincor in future times; and that the first and the last of the Nimboth dynasty, conferring together, would effect a mode of release and the lifting of the doom. The evil was not named in the prophecy: but it was said that the two emperors would learn the solution of their problem by the breaking of an ancient clay image that guards the nethermost vault below the imperial palace in Yethlyreom."

Then, having heard this prophecy from the faded lips of his forefather, Illeiro mused a while, and said:

"I remember now an afternoon in early youth, when searching idly through the unused vaults of our palace, as a boy might do, I came to the last vault and found therein a dusty, uncouth image of clay, whose form and countenance were strange to me. And, knowing not the prophecy. I turned away in disappointment, and went back as idly as I had come, to seek the moted sunlight."

Then, stealing away from their heedless kinfolk, and carrying jeweled lamps they had taken from the hall, Hestaiyon and Illeiro went downward by subterranean stairs beneath the palace; and, threading like implacable furtive shadows the maze of nighted corridors, they came at last to the lowest crypt.

Here, in the black dust and clotted cobwebs of an immemorial past, they found, as had been decreed, the clay image, whose rude features were those of a forgotten earthly god. And Illeiro shattered the image with a fragment of stone; and he and Hestaiyon took from its hollow center a great sword of unrusted steel, and a heavy key of untarnished bronze, and tablets of bright brass on which were inscribed the various things to be done, so that Cincor should be rid of the dark reign of the necromancers and the people should win back to oblivious death.

So, with the key of untarnished bronze, Illeiro unlocked, as the tablets had instructed him to do, a low and narrow door at the end of the nethermost vault, beyond the broken image; and he and Hestaiyon saw, as had been prophesied, the coiling steps of somber stone that led downward to an undiscovered abyss, where the sunken fires of earth still burned. And leaving Illeiro to ward the open door, Hestaiyon took up the sword of unrusted steel in his thin hand, and went back to the hall where the necromancers slept, lying a-sprawl on their couches of rose and purple, with the wan, bloodless dead about them in patient ranks.

Upheld by the ancient prophecy and the lore of the bright tablets, Hestaiyon lifted the great sword and struck off the head of Mmatmuor and the head of Sodosma, each with a single blow. Then, as had been directed, he quartered the remains with mighty strokes. And the necromancers gave up their unclean lives, and lay supine, without movement, adding a deeper red to the rose and a brighter hue to the sad purple of their couches.

Then, to his kin, who stood silent and listless, hardly knowing their liberation, the venerable mummy of Hestaiyon spoke in sere murmurs, but authoritatively, as a king who issues commands to his children. The dead emperors and empresses stirred, like autumn leaves in a sudden wind, and a whisper passed among them and went forth from the palace, to be communicated at length, by devious ways, to all the dead of Cincor.

All that night, and during the blood-dark day that followed, by wavering torches or the light of the failing sun, an endless army of plague-eaten liches, of tattered skeletons, poured in a ghastly torrent through the streets of Yethlyreom and along the palace-hall where Hestaiyon stood guard above the slain necromancers. Unpausing, with vague, fixed eyes, they went on like driven shadows, to seek the subterraaean vaults below the palace, to pass through the open door where Illeiro waited in the last vault, and then to wend downward by a thousand thousand steps to the verge of that gulf in which boiled the ebbing fires of earth. There, from the verge, they flung themselves to a second death and the clean annihilation of the bottomless flames.

But, after all had gone to their release, Hestaiyon still remained, alone in the fading sunset, beside the cloven corpses of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. There, as the tablets had directed him to do, he made trial of those spells of elder necromancy which he had known in his former wisdom, and cursed

the dismembered bodies with that perpetual life-in-death which Mmatmuor and Sodosma had sought to inflict upon the people of Cincor. And maledictions came from the pale lips, and the heads rolled horribly with glaring eyes, and the limbs and torsos writhed on their imperial couches amid clotted blood. Then, with no backward look, knowing that all was done as had been ordained and predicted from the first, the mummy of Hestaiyon left the necromancers to their doom, and went wearily through the nighted labyrinth of vaults to rejoin Illeiro.

So, in tranquil silence, with no further need of words, Illeiro and Hestaiyon passed through the open door of the nether vault, and Illeiro locked the door behind them with its key of untarnished bronze. And thence, by the coiling stairs, they wended their way to the verge of the sunken flames and were one with their kinfolk and their people in the last, ultinate nothingness.

But of Mmatmuor and Sodosma, men say that their quartered bodies crawl to and fro to this day in Yethlyreom, finding no peace or respite from their doom of life-in-death, and seeking vainly through the black maze of nether vaults the door that was locked by Illeiro.

THE ENCHANTRESS OF SYLAIRE

***Weird Tales*, July 1941**

"Why, you big ninny! I could never marry you," declared the demoiselle Dorothée, only daughter of the Sieur des Flèches. Her lips pouted at Anselme like two ripe berries. Her voice was honey—but honey filled with bee-stings.

"You are not so ill-looking. And your manners are fair. But I wish I had a mirror that could show you to yourself for the fool that you really are."

"Why?" queried Anselme, hurt and puzzled.

"Because you are just an addle-headed dreamer, pouring over books like a monk. You care for nothing but silly old romances and legends. People say that you even write verses. It is lucky that you are at least the second son of the Comte du Framboisier—for you will never be anything more than that."

"But you loved me a little yesterday," said Anselme, bitterly. A woman finds nothing good in the man she has ceased to love.

"Dolt! Donkey!" cried Dorothée, tossing her blonde ringlets in pettish arrogance. "If you were not all that I have said, you would never remind me of yesterday. Go, idiot—and do not return."

Anselme, the hermit, had slept little, tossing distractedly on his hard, narrow pallet. His blood, it seemed, had been fevered by the sultriness of the summer night.

Then, too, the natural heat of youth had contributed to his unease. He had not wanted to think of women—a certain woman in particular. But, after thirteen months of solitude, in the heart of the wild woodland of Averoigne, he was still far from forgetting. Crueller even than her taunts was the remembered beauty of Dorothée des Flèches: the full-ripened mouth, the round arms and slender waist, the breast and hips that had not yet acquired their amplest curves.

Dreams had thronged the few short intervals of slumber, bringing other visitants, fair but nameless, about his couch.

He rose at sundown, weary but restless. Perhaps he would find refreshment by bathing, as he had often done, in a pool fed from the river

Isoile and hidden among alder and willow thickets. The water, deliciously cool at that hour, would assuage his feverishness.

His eyes burned and smarted in the morning's gold glare when he emerged from the hut of wattled osier withes. His thoughts wandered, still full of the night's disorder. Had he been wise, after all, to quit the world, to leave his friends and family, and seclude himself because of a girl's unkindness? He could not deceive himself into thinking that he had become a hermit through any aspiration toward sainthood, such as had sustained the old anchorites. By dwelling so much, alone, was he not merely aggravating the malady he had sought to cure?

Perhaps, it occurred to him belatedly, he was proving himself the ineffectual dreamer, the idle fool that Dorothee had accused him of being. It was weakness to let himself be soured by a disappointment.

Walking with downcast eyes, he came unaware to the thickets that fringed the pool. He parted the young willows without lifting his gaze, and was about to cast off his garments. But at that instant the nearby sound of splashing water startled him from his abstraction.

With some dismay, Anselme realized that the pool was already occupied. To his further consternation, the occupant was a woman. Standing near to the center, where the pool deepened, she stirred the water with her hands till it rose and rippled against the base of her bosom. Her pale wet skin glistened like white rose-petals dipped in dew.

Anselme's dismay turned to curiosity and then to unwilling delight. He told himself that he wanted to withdraw but feared to frighten the bather by a sudden movement. Stooping with her clear profile and her shapely left shoulder toward him, she had not perceived his presence.

A woman, young and beautiful, was the last sight he had wished to see. Nevertheless, he could not turn his eyes away. The woman was a stranger to him, and he felt that she was no girl of the village or countryside. She was lovely as any chatelaine of the great castles of Averoigne. And yet surely no lady or demoiselle would bathe unattended in a forest pool.

Thick-curling chestnut hair, bound by a light silver fillet, billowed over her shoulders and burned to red, living gold where the sun-rays searched it out through the foliage. Hung about her neck, a light golden chain seemed to reflect the lusters of her hair, dancing between her breasts as she played with the ripples.

The hermit stood watching her like a man caught in webs of sudden sorcery. His youth mounted within him, in response to her beauty's evocation.

Seeming to tire of her play, she turned her back and began to move toward the opposite shore, where, as Anselme now noticed, a pile of feminine garments lay in charming disorder on the grass. Step by step she rose from the shoaling water, revealing hips and thighs like those of an antique Venus.

Then, beyond her, he saw that a huge wolf, appearing furtively as a shadow from the thicket, had stationed itself beside the heap of clothing. Aoselme had never seen such a wolf before. He remembered the tales of werewolves, that were believed to infest that ancient wood, and his alarm was touched instantly with the fear which only preternatural things can arouse. The beast was strangely colored, its fur being a glossy bluish-black. It was far larger than the common gray wolves of the forest. Crouching inscrutably, half hidden in the sedges, it seemed to await the woman as she waded shoreward.

Another moment, thought Anselme, and she would perceive her danger, would scream and turn in terror. But still she went on, her head bent forward as if in serene meditation. "Beware the wolf!" he shouted, his voice strangely loud and seeming to break a magic stillness. Even as the words left his lips, the wolf trotted away and disappeared behind the thickets toward the great elder forest of oaks and beeches. The woman smiled over her shoulder at Anselme, turning a short oval face with slightly slanted eyes and lips red as pomegranate flowers. Apparently she was neither frightened by the wolf nor embarrassed by Anselme's presence.

"There is nothing to fear," she said, in a voice like the pouring of warm honey. "One wolf, or two, will hardly attack me."

"But perhaps there are others lurking about," persisted Anselme. "And there are worse dangers than wolves for one who wanders alone and unattended through the forest of Averoigne. When you have dressed, with your permission I shall attend you safely to your home, whether it be near or far."

"My home lies near enough in one sense, and far enough in another," returned the lady, cryptically. "But you may accompany me there if you wish."

She turned to the pile of garments, and Anselme went a few paces away among the alders and busied himself by cutting a stout cudgel for weapon against wild beasts or other adversaries. A strange but delightful agitation possessed him, and he nearly nicked his fingers several times with the knife. The misogyny that had driven him to a woodland hermitage began to appear slightly immature, even juvenile. He had let himself be wounded too deeply and too long by the injustice of a pert child.

By the time Anselme finished cutting his cudgel, the lady had completed her toilet. She came to meet him, swaying like a lamia. A bodice of vernal green velvet, baring the upper slopes of her breasts, clung tightly about her as a lover's embrace. A purple velvet gown, flowered with pale azure and crimson, moulded itself to the sinuous outlines of her hips and legs. Her slender feet were enclosed in fine soft leather buskins, scarlet-dyed, with tips curling pertly upward. The fashion of her garments, though oddly antique, confirmed Anselme in his belief that she was a person of no common rank.

Her raiment revealed, rather than concealed, the attributes of her femininity. Her manner yielded—but it also withheld.

Anselme bowed before her with a courtly grace that belied his rough country garb.

"Ah! I can see that you have not always been a hermit," she said, with soft mockery in her voice.

"You know me, then," said Anselme.

"I know many things. I am Sephora, the enchantress. It is unlikely that you have heard of me, for I dwell apart, in a place that none can find—unless I permit them to find it."

"I know little of enchantment," admitted Anselme. "But I can believe that you are an enchantress."

For some minutes they had followed a little used path that serpentined through the antique wood. It was a path the hermit had never come upon before in all his wanderings. Lithe saplings and low-grown boughs of huge beeches pressed closely upon it. Anselme, holding them aside for his companion, came often in thrilling contact with her shoulder and arm. Often she swayed against him, as if losing her balance on the rough ground. Her weight was a delightful burden, too soon relinquished. His pulses coursed tumultuously and would not quiet themselves again.

Anselme had quite forgotten his eremitic resolves. His blood and his curiosity, were excited more and more. He ventured various gallantries, to which Sephora gave provocative replies. His questions, however, she answered with elusive vagueness. He could learn nothing, could decide nothing, about her. Even her age puzzled him: at one moment he thought her a young girl, the next, a mature woman.

Several times, as they went on, he caught glimpses of black fur beneath the low, shadow foliage. He felt sure that the strange black wolf he had seen by the pool was accompanying them with a furtive surveillance. But somehow his sense of alarm was dulled by the enchantment that had fallen upon him.

Now the path steepened, climbing a densely wooded hill. The trees thinned to straggly, stunted pines, encircling a brown, open moorland as the tonsure encircles a monk's crown. The moor was studded with Druidic monoliths, dating from ages prior to the Roman occupation of Averoigne. Almost at its center, there towered a massive cromlech, consisting of two upright slabs that supported a third like the lintel of a door. The path ran straight to the cromlech.

"This is the portal of my domain," said Sephora, as they neared it. "I grow faint with fatigue. You must take me in your arms and carry me through the ancient doorway."

Anselme obeyed very willingly. Her cheeks paled, her eyelids fluttered and fell as he lifted her. For a moment he thought that she had fainted; but her arms crept warm and clinging around his neck.

Dizzy with the sudden vehemence of his emotion, he carried her through the cromlech. As he went, his lips wandered across her eyelids and passed deliriously to the soft red flame of her lips and the rose pallor of her throat. Once more she seemed to faint, beneath his fervor.

His limbs melted and a fiery blindness filled his eyes. The earth seemed to yield beneath them like an elastic couch as he and Sephora sank down.

Lifting his head, Anselme looked about him with swiftly growing bewilderment. He had carried Sephora only a few paces—and yet the grass on which they lay was not the sparse and sun-dried grass of the moor, but was deep, verdant and filled with tiny vernal blossoms! Oaks and beeches, huger even than those of the familiar forest, loomed umbrageously on every hand with masses of new, golden-green leafage, where he had thought to

see the open upland. Looking back, he saw that the gray, lichened slabs of the cromlech itself alone rearmed of that former landscape.

Even the sun had changed its position. It had hung at Anselme's left, still fairly low in the east, when he and Sephora had reached the moorland. But now, shining with amber rays through a rift in the forest, it had almost touched the horizon on his right.

He recalled that Sephora had told him she was an enchantress. Here, indeed, was proof of sorcery! He eyed her with curious doubts and misgivings.

"Be not alarmed," said Sephora, with a honeyed smile of reassurance. "I told you that the cromlech was the doorway to my domain. We are now in a land lying outside of time and space as you have hitherto known them. The very seasons are different here. But there is no sorcery involved, except that of the great ancient Druids, who knew the secret of this hidden realm and reared those mighty slabs for a portal between the worlds. If you should weary of me, you can pass back at any time through the doorway.—But I hope that you have not tired of me so soon—"

Anselme, though still bewildered, was relieved by this information. He proceeded to prove that the hope expressed by Sephora was well-founded. Indeed, he proved it so lengthily and in such detail that the sun had fallen below the horizon before Sephora could draw a full breath and speak again.

"The air grows chill," she said, pressing against him and shivering lightly. "But my home is close at hand."

They came in the twilight to a high round tower among trees and grass-grown mounds.

"Ages ago," announced Sephora, "there was a great castle here. Now the tower alone remains, and I am its chatelaine, the last of my family. The tower and the lands about it are named Sylaire."

Tall dim tapers lit the interior, which was hung with rich arrases, vaguely and strangely pictured. Aged, corpse-pale servants in antique garb went to and fro with the furtiveness of specters, setting wines and foods before the enchantress and her guest in a broad hall. The wines were of rare flavor and immense age, the foods were curiously spiced. Anselme ate and drank copiously. It was like some fantastic dream, and he accepted his surroundings as a dreamer does, untroubled by their strangeness.

The wines were potent, drugging his senses into warm oblivion. Even stronger was the inebriation of Sephora's nearness.

However, Ansehne was a little startled when the huge black wolf he had seen that morning entered the hall and fawned like a dog at the feet of his hostess.

"You see, he is quite tame," she said, tossing the wolf bits of meat from her plate. "Often I let him come and go in the tower; and sometimes he attends me when I go forth from Sylaire."

"He is a fierce-looking beast," Anselme observed doubtfully. It seemed that the wolf understood the words, for he bared his teeth at Anselme, with a hoarse, preternaturally deep growl. Spots of red fire glowed in his somber eyes, like coals fanned by devils in dark pits.

"Go away, Malachie," commanded the enchantress, sharply. The wolf obeyed her, slinking from the hall with a malign backward glance at Anselme.

"He does not like you," said Sephora. "That, however, is perhaps not surprising."

Anselme, bemused with wine and love, forgot to inquire the meaning of her last words.

Morning came too soon, with upward-slanting beams that fired the treetops around the tower.

"You must leave me for awhile," said Sephora, after they had breakfasted. "I have neglected my magic of late—and there are matters into which I should inquire."

Bending prettily, she kissed the palms of his hands. Then, with backward glances and smiles, she retired to a room at the tower's top beside her bedchamber. Here, she had told Anselme, her grimoires and potions and other appurtenances of magic were kept.

During her absence, Aoselme decided to go out and explore the woodland about the tower. Mindful of the black wolf, whose tameness he did not trust despite Sephora's reassurances, he took with him the cudgel he had cut that previous day in the thickets near the Isoile.

There were paths everywhere, all leading to fresh loveliness. Truly, Sylaire was a region of enchantment. Drawn by the dreamy golden light, and the breeze laden with the freshness of spring flowers, Anselme wandered on from glade to glade.

He came to a grassy hollow, where a tiny spring bubbled from beneath mossed boulders. He seated himself on one of the boulders, musing on the strange happiness that had entered his life so unexpectedly. It was like one of the old romances, the tales of glamor and fantasy, that he had loved to read. Smiling, he remembered the gibes with which Dorothée des Flèches had expressed her disapproval of his taste for such reading-matter. What, he wondered, would Dorothée think now? At any rate, she would hardly care —

His reflections were interrupted. There was a rustling of leaves, and the black wolf emerged from the boscage in front of him, whining as if to attract his attention. The beast had somehow lost his appearance of fierceness.

Curious, and a little alarmed, Anselme watched in wonder while the wolf began to uproot with his paws certain plants that somewhat resembled wild garlic. These he devoured with palpable eagerness.

Anselme's mouth gaped at the thing which ensued. One moment the wolf was before him. Then, where the wolf had been, there rose up the figure of a man, lean, powerful, with blue-black hair and beard, and darkly flaming eyes. The hair grew almost to his brows, the beard nearly to his lower eyelashes. His arms, legs, shoulders and chest were matted with bristles.

"Be assured that I mean you no harm," said the man. "I am Malachie du Marais, a sorcerer, and the one-time lover of Sephora. Tiring of me, and fearing my wizardry, she turned me into a werewolf by giving me secretly the waters of a certain pool that lies amid this enchanted domain of Sylaire. The pool is cursed from old time with the infection of lycanthropy—and Sephora has added her spells to its power. I can throw off the wolf shape for a little while during the dark of the moon. At other times I can regain my human form, though only for a few minutes, by eating the root that you saw me dig and devour. The root is very scarce."

Anselme felt that the sorceries of Sylaire were more complicated than he had hitherto imagined. But amid his bewilderment he was unable to trust the weird being before him. He had heard many tales of werewolves, who were reputedly common in medieval France. Their ferocity, people said, was that of demons rather than of mere brutes.

“Allow me to warn you of the grave danger in which you stand,” continued Malachie du Marais. “You were rash to let yourself be enticed by Sephora. If you are wise, you will leave the purlieus of Sylaire with all possible dispatch. The land is old in evil and sorcery, and all who dwell within it are ancient as the land, and are equally accursed. The servants of Sephora, who waited upon you yestereve, are vampires that sleep by day in the tower vaults and come forth by night. They go out through the Druid portal, to prey on the people of Averoigne.”

He paused as if to emphasize the words that followed. His eyes glittered balefully, and his deep voice assumed a hissing undertone. “Sephora herself is an ancient lamia, well-nigh immortal, who feeds on the vital forces of young men. She has had many lovers throughout the ages—and I must deplore, even though I cannot specify, their ultimate fate. The youth and beauty that she retains are illusions. If you could see Sephora as she really is, you would recoil in revulsion, cured of your perilous love; You would see her—unthinkably old, and hideous with infamies.”

“But how can such things be?” queried Anselme. “Truly, I cannot believe you.”

Malachie shrugged his hairy shoulders. “At least I have warned you. But the wolf-change approaches, and I must go. If you will come to me later, in my abode which lies a mile to the westward of Sephora’s tower, perhaps I can convince you that my statements are the truth. In the meanwhile, ask yourself if you have seen any mirrors, such as a beautiful young woman would use, in Sephora’s chamber. Vampires and lamias are afraid of mirrors—for a good reason.”

Anselme went back to the tower with a troubled mind. What Malachie had told him was incredible. Yet there was the matter of Sephora’s servants. He had hardly noticed their absence that morning—and yet he had not seen them since the previous eve—And he could not remember any mirrors among Sephora’s various feminine belongings.

He found Sephora awaiting him in the tower’s lower hall. One glance at the utter sweetness of her womanhood, and he felt ashamed of the doubts with which Maiachie had inspired him.

Sephora’s blue-gray eyes questioned him, deep and tender as those of some pagan goddess of love. Reserving no detail, he told her of his meeting with the werewolf.

“Ah! I did well to trust my intuitions,” she said. “Last night, when the black wolf growled and glowered at you, it occurred to me that he was perhaps becoming more dangerous than I had realized; This morning, in my chamber of magic, I made use of my clairvoyant powers and I learned much. Indeed, I have been careless. Malachie has become a menace to my security. Also, he hates you, and would destroy our happiness.”

“Is it true, then,” questioned Anselme, “that he was your lover, and that you turned him into a werewolf?”

“He was my lover—long, long ago. But the werewolf form was his own choice, assumed out of evil curiosity by drinking from the pool of which he told you. He has regretted it since, for the wolf shape, while giving him certain powers of harm, in reality limits his actions and his sorceries. He wishes to return to human shape, and if he succeeds, will become doubly dangerous to us both.

“I should have watched him well—for I now find that he has stolen from me the recipe of antidote to the werewolf waters. My clairvoyance tells me that he has already brewed the antidote, in the brief intervals of humanity regained by chewing a certain root. When he drinks the potion, as I think that he means to do before long, he will regain human form—permanently. He waits only for the dark of the moon, when the werewolf spell is at its weakest.”

“But why should Malachie hate me?” asked Anselme. “And how can I help you against him?”

“That first question is slightly stupid, my dear. Of course, he is jealous of you. As for helping me—well, I thought of a good trick to play on Malachie.”

She produced a small purple glass vial, triangular in shape, from the folds of her bodice.

“This vial,” she told him, “is filled with the water of the werewolf pool. Through my clairvoyant vision, I learned that Malachie keeps his newly brewed potion in a vial of similar size, shape and color. If you can go to his den and substitute one vial for the other without detection, I believe that the results will be quite amusing.”

“Indeed, I will go,” Ansehne assured her.

“The present should be a favorable time,” said Sephora. “It is now within an hour of noon; and Malachie often hunts at this time. If you should find

him in his den, or he should return while you are there, you can say that you came in response to his invitation."

She gave Anselme careful instructions that would enable to find the werewolf's den without delay. Also, she gave him a sword, saying that the blade had been tempered to the chanting of magic spells that made it effective against such beings as Malachie. "The wolf's temper has grown uncertain," she warned. "If he should attack you, your alder stick would prove a poor weapon…"

* * * *

It was easy to locate the den, for well-used paths ran toward it with little deviation. The place was the mounded remnant of a tower that had crumbled down into grassy earth and mossy blocks. The entrance had once been a lofty doorway: now it was only a hole, such as a large animal would make in leaving and returning to its burrow.

Anselme hesitated before the hole. "Are you there, Malachie du Marais?" he shouted. There was no answer, no sound of movement from within. Anselme shouted once more. At last, stooping on hands and knees, he entered the den.

Light poured through several apertures, latticed with wandering tree-roots, where the mound had fallen in from above. The place was a cavern rather than a room. It stank with carrion remnants into whose nature Anselme did not inquire too closely. The ground was littered with bones, broken stems and leaves of plants, and shattered or rusted vessels of alchemic use. A verdigris-eaten kettle hung from a tripod above ashes and ends of charred faggots. Rain-sodden grimoires lay mouldering in rusty metal covers. The three legged ruin of a table was propped against the wall. It was covered with a medley of oddments, among which Anselme discerned a purple vial resembling the one given him by Sephora.

In one corner was a litter of dead grass. The strong, rank odor of a wild beast mingled with the carrion stench.

Anselme looked about and listened cautiously. Then, without delay, he substituted Sephora's vial for the one on Malachie's table. The stolen vial he placed under his jerkin.

There was a padding of feet at the cavern's entrance. Anselme turned—to confront the black wolf. The beast came toward him, crouching tensely as if about to spring, with eyes glaring like crimson coals of Avernus. Anselme's fingers dropped to the hilt of the enchanted sword that Sephora had given him.

The wolf's eyes followed his fingers. It seemed that he recognized the sword. He turned from Anselme, and began to chew some roots of the garlic-like plant, which he had doubtless collected to make possible those operations which he could hardly have carried on in wolfish form.

This time, the transformation was not complete. The head, and body of Malachie du Marais rose up again before Ansehne; but the legs were the hind legs of a monstrous wolf. He was like some bestial hybrid of antique legend.

"Your visit honors me," he said, half snarling, with suspicion in his eyes, and voice. "Few have cared to enter my poor abode, and I am grateful to you. In recognition of your kindness, I shall make you a present."

With the padding movements of a wolf, he went over to the ruinous table and groped amid the confused oddments with which it was covered. He drew out an oblong silver mirror, brightly burnished, with jeweled handle, such as a great lady or damsel might own. This he offered to Anselme.

"I give you the mirror of Reality," he announced. "In it, all things are reflected according to their true nature. The illusions of enchantment cannot deceive it. You disbelieved me, when I warned you against Sephora. But if you hold this mirror to her face and observe the reflection, you will see that her beauty, like everything else in Sylaire, is a hollow lie—the mask of ancient horror and corruption. If you doubt me, hold the mirror to my face—now: for I, too, am part of the land's immemorial evil."

Anselme took the silver oblong and obeyed Malachie's injunction. A moment, and his nerveless fingers almost dropped the mirror. He had seen reflected within it a face that the sepulcher should have hidden long ago—

The horror of that sight had shaken him so deeply that he could not afterwards recall the circumstances of his departure from the werewolf's lair. He had kept the werewolf's gift; but more than once he had been prompted to throw it away. He tried to tell himself that what he had seen was merely the result of some wizard trick. He refused to believe that any

mirror would reveal Sephora as anything but the young and lovely sweetheart whose kisses were still warm on his lips.

All such matters, however, were driven from Anselme's mind by the situation that he found when he re-entered the tower hall. Three visitors had arrived during his absence. They stood fronting Sephoia, who, with a tranquil smile on her lips, was apparently trying to explain something to them. Anselme recognized the visitors with much amzement, not untouched with consternation.

One of them was Dorothée des Flèches, clad in a trim traveling habit. The others were two serving men of her father, armed with longbows, quivers of arrows, broadswords and daggers. In spite of this array of weapons, they did not look any too comfortable or at home. But Dorothée seemed to have retained her usual matter-of-fact assurance.

"What are you doing in this queer place, Anselme?" she cried. "And who is this woman, this chatelaine of Sylaire, as she calls herself?"

Anselme felt that she would hardly understand any answer that he could give to either query. He looked at Sephora, then back at Dorothée. Sephora was the essence of all the beauty and romance that he had ever craved. How could he have fancied himself in love with Dorothée, how could he have spent thirteen months in a hermitage because of her coldness and changeability? She was pretty enough, with the common bodily charms of youth. But she was stupid, wanting in imagination—prosy already in the flush of her girlhood as a middle-aged housewife. Small wonder that she had failed to understand him.

"What brings you here?" he countered. "I had not thought to see you again."

"I missed you, Anselme," she sighed. "People said that you had left the world because of your love for me, and had become a hermit. At last I came to seek you. But you had disappeared. Some hunters had seen you pass yesterday with a strange woman, across the moor of Druid stones. They said you had both vanished beyond the cromlech, fading as if in air. Today I followed you with my father's serving men. We found ourselves in this strange region, of which no one has ever heard. And now this woman—"

The sentence was interrupted by a mad howling that filled the room with eldritch echoes. The black wolf, with jaws foaming and slavering, broke in through the door that had been opened to admit Sephora's visitors.

Dorothée des Fleches began to scream as he dashed straight toward her, seeming to single her out for the first victim of his rabid fury.

Something, it was plain, had maddened him. Perhaps the water of the werewolf pool, substituted for the antidote, had served to redouble the original curse of lycanthropy.

The two serving men, bristling with their arsenal of weapons, stood like effigies. Anselme drew the sword given him by the enchantress, and leaped forward between Dorothée and the wolf. He raised his weapon, which was straightbladed, and suitable for stabbing. The mad werewolf sprang as if hurled from a catapult, and his red, open gorge was spitted on the out-thrust point. Anselme's hand was jarred on the sword-hilt, and the shock drove him backward. The wolf fell thrashing at Anselme's feet. His jaws had clenched on the blade. The point protruded beyond the stiff bristles of his neck.

Anselme tugged vainly at the sword. Then the black-furred body ceased to thrash—and the blade came easily. It had been withdrawn from the sagging mouth of the dead ancient sorcerer, Malachie du Marais, which lay before Anselme on the flagstones. The sorcerer's face was now the face that Anselme had seen in the mirror, when he held it up at Malachie's injunction.

"You have saved me! How wonderful!" cried Dorothée.

Anselme saw that she had started toward him with out-thrust arms. A moment more, and the situation would become embarrassing.

He recalled the mirror, which he had kept under his jerkin, together with the vial stolen from Malachie du Marais. What, he wondered, would Dorothée see in its burnished depths?

He drew the mirror forth swiftly and held it to her face as she advanced upon him. What she beheld in the mirror he never knew but the effect was startling. Dorothée gasped, and her eyes dilated in manifest horror. Then, covering her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out some ghastly vision, she ran shrieking from the hall. The serving men followed her. The celerity of their movements made it plain that they were not sorry to leave this dubious lair of wizards and witches.

Sephora began to laugh softy. Anselme found himself chuckling. For awhile they abandoned themselves to uproarious mirth. Then Sephora sobered.

“I know why Malachie gave you the mirror,” she said. “Do you not wish to see my reflection in it?”

Anselme realized that he still held the mirror in his hand. Without answering Sephora, he went over to the nearest window, which looked down on a deep pit lined with bushes, that had been part of an ancient, half-filled moat. He hurled the silver oblong into the pit.

“I am content with what my eyes tell me, without the aid of any mirror,” he declared. “Now let us pass to other matters which have been interrupted too long.”

Again the clinging deliciousness of Sephora was in his arms, and her fruit-soft mouth was crushed beneath his hungry lips.

The strongest of all enchantments held them in its golden circle.

THE INVISIBLE CITY

***Wonder Stories*, June 1932.**

"Confound you," said Langley in a hoarse whisper that came with effort through swollen lips, blue-black with thirst. "You've gulped about twice your share of the last water in the Lob-nor Desert." He shook the canteen which Furnham had just returned to him, and listened with a savage frown to the ominously light gurgling of its contents.

The two surviving members of the Furnham Archaeological Expedition eyed each other with newborn but rapidly growing disfavor. Furnham, the leader, flushed with dark anger beneath his coat of deepening dust and sunburn. The accusation was unjust, for he had merely moistened his parched tongue from Langley's canteen. His own canteen, which he had shared equally With his companion, was now empty.

Up to that moment the two men had been the best of friends. Their months of association in a hopeless search for the ruins of the semi-fabulous city of Kobar had given them abundant reason to respect each other. Their quarrel sprang from nothing else than the mental distortion and morbidity of sheer exhaustion, and the strain of a desperate predicament. Langley, at times, was even growing a trifle light-headed after their long ordeal of wandering on foot through a land without wells, beneath a sun whose flames poured down upon them like molten lead.

"We ought to reach the Tarim River pretty soon," said Furnham stiffly, ignoring the charge and repressing a desire to announce in mordant terms his unfavorable opinion of Langley.

"If we don't, I guess it will be your fault," the other snapped. "There's been a jinx on this expedition from the beginning; and I shouldn't wonder if the jinx were you. It was your idea to hunt for Kobar anyway. I've never believed there was any such place."

Furnham glowered at his companion, too near the breaking point himself to make due allowance for Langley's nerve-wrought condition, and then turned away, refusing to reply. The two plodded on, ignoring each other with sullen ostentatiousness.

The expedition, consisting of five Americans in the employ of a New York museum, had started from Khotan two months before to investigate the archaeological remains of Eastern Turkestan. Ill-luck had dogged them continually; and the ruins of Kobar, their main objective, said to have been built by the ancient Uighurs, had eluded them like a mirage. They found other ruins, had exhumed a few Greek and Byzantine coins, and a few broken Buddhas, but nothing of much novelty or importance, from a museum viewpoint.

At the very outset, soon after leaving the oasis of Tchertchen, one member of the party had died from gangrene caused by the vicious bite of a Bactrian camel. Later on, a second, seized by a cramp while swimming in the shallow Tarim Kver, near the reedy marshes of Lob-nor, that strange remnant of a vast inland sea, had drowned before his companions could reach him. A third had died of some mysterious fever. Then in the desert south of the Tarim, where Furnham and Langley still persisted in a futile effort to locate the lost city, their Mongol guides had deserted them. They took all the camels and most of the provisions, leaving to the two men only their rifles, their canteens, their other personal belongings, the various antique relics they had amassed, and a few tins of food.

The desertion was hard to explain, for the Mongols had heretofore shown themselves reliable enough. However, they had displayed a queer reluctance on the previous day, had seemed unwilling to venture further among the endless undulations of coiling sand and pebbly soil.

Furnham, who knew the language better than Langley, had gathered that they were afraid of something, were deterred by superstitious legends concerning this portion of the Lob-nor Desert. But they had been strangely vague and reticent as to the object of their fear; and Furnham had learned nothing of its actual nature.

Leaving everything but their food, water and rifles to the mercy of the drifting sands, the men had started northward toward the Tarim, which was sixty or seventy miles away. If they could reach it, they would find shelter in one of the sparse settlemeats of fishermen along its shores; and could eventually make their way back to civilization.

It was now afternoon of the second day of their wanderings. Langley had suffered most, and he staggered a little as they went on beneath the eternally cloudless heavens, across the glaring desolation of the dreary landscape.

His heavy Winchester had become an insufferable burden, and he had thrown it away in spite of the remonstrance of Furnham, who still retained his own weapon.

The sun had lowered a little, but burned with gruelling rays, tyrannically torrid, through the bright inferno of stagnant air. There was no wind, except for brief and furious puffs that whirled the light sand in the faces of the men, and then died as suddenly as they had risen. The ground gave back the heat and glare of the heavens in shimmering, blinding waves of refraction.

Langley and Furnham mounted a low, gradual ridge and paused in sweltering exhaustion on its rocky spine. Before them was a broad, shallow valley, at which they stared in a sort of groggy wonderment, puzzled by the level and artificial-looking depression, perfectly square, and perhaps a third of a mile wide, which they descried in its center. The depression was bare and empty with no sign of ruins, but was lined with numerous pits that suggested the ground-plan of a vanished city.

The men blinked, and both were prompted to rub their eyes as they peered through flickering heatwaves; for each had received a momentary impression of flashing light, broken into myriad spires and columns, that seemed to fill the shallow basin and fade like a mirage.

Still mindful of their quarrel, but animated by the same unspoken thought, they stared down the long declivity, heading straight towmd the depression. If the place were the site of some ancient city they might possibly hope to find a well or water-spring.

They approached the basin’s edge, and were puzzled more and more by its regularity. Certainly it was not the work of nature; and it might have been quarried yesterday, for seemingly there were no ravages of wind and weather in the sheer walls; and the floor was remarkably smooth, except for the multitude of square pits that ran in straight, intersecting lines, like the cellars of destroyed or unbuilt houses. A growing sense of strangeness and mystery troubled the two men; and they were blinded at intervals by the flash of evanescent light that seemed to overflow the basin with phantom towers and pillars.

They paused within a few feet of the edge, incredulous and bewildered. Each began to wonder if his brain had been affected by the sun. Their sensations were such as might mark the incipience of delirium. Amid the blasts of furnace-like heat, a sort of icy coolness appeared to come upon

them from the broad basin. Clammy but refreshing, like the chill that might emanate from walls of sunless stone, it revived their fainting senses and quickened their awareness of unexplained mystery.

The coolness became even more noticeable when they reached the very verge of the precipice. Here, peering over, they saw that the sides fell unbroken at all ponts for a depth of twenty feet or more. In the smooth bottom, the cellar-like pits yawned darkly and unfathomably. The floor about the pits was free of sand, pebbles or detritus.

"Heavens, what do you make of that?" muttered Furnham to himself rather than to Langley. He stooped over the edge, staring down with feverish and inconclusive speculations. The riddle was beyond his experience—he had met nothing like it in all his researches. His puzzlement, however, was partly submerged in the more pressing problem of how he and Langley were to descend the sheer walls. Thirst—and the hope of finding water in one of the pits—were more important at that moment than the origin and nature of the square basin.

Suddenly, in his stooping position, a kind of giddiness seized him, and the earth seemed to pitch deliriously beneath his feet. He staggered, he lost his balance, and fell forward from the verge.

Half-fainting, he closed his eyes against the hurtling descent and the crash twenty feet below. Instantly, it seemed, he struck bottom, Amazed and incomprehending, he found that he was lying at full length, prone on his stomach in mid-air, upborne by a hard, flat, invisible substance. His outflung hands encountered an obstruction, cool as ice and smooth as marble; and the chill of it smote through his clothing as he lay gazing down into the gulf. Wrenched from his grasp by the fall, his rifle hung beside him.

He heard the startled cry of Langley, and then realized that the latter had seized him by the ankles and was drawing him back to the precipice. He felt the unseen surface slide beneath him, level as a concrete pavement, glib as glass. Then Langley was helping him to his feet. Both, for the nonce, had forgotten their misunderstanding.

"Say, am I bughouse?" cried Langley. "I thought you were a goner when you fell. What have we stumbled on, anyhow?"

"Stumbled is good," said Furnham reflectively as he tried to collect himself. "That basin is floored with something solid, but transparent as air —something unknown to geologists or chemists. God knows what it is, or

where it came from or who put it there. We've found a mystery that puts Kobar in the shade. I move that we investigate."

He stepped forward, very cautiously, still half-fearful of falling, and stood suspended over the basin.

"If you can do it, I guess I can," said Langley as he followed. With Furnham in the lead, the two began to cross the basin, moving slowly and gingerly along the invisibIe pavement. The sensation of peering down as if through empty air was indescribably weird.

They had started midway between two rows of the dark pits, which lay fifty feet apart. Somehow, it was like following a street. After they had gone some little distance from the verge, Furnham deviated to the left, with the idea of looking directly down into one of these mysterious pits. Before he could reach a vertical vantage-point, he was arrested by a smooth, solid wall, like that of a building.

"I think we've discovered a city," he announced. Groping his way along the air-clear wall, which seemed free of angles or roughness, he came to an open doorway. It was about five feet wide and of indeterminable height. Fingering the wall like a blind man, he found that it was nearly six inches thick. He and Langley entered the door, still walking on a level pavement, and advanced without obstruction, as if in a large empty room.

For an instant, as they went forward, light seemed to flash above them in great arches and arcades, touched with evanescent colors like those in fountain-spray. Then it vanished, and the sun shone down as before from a void and desert-heaven. The coolness emanating from the unknown substance was more pronounced than ever; and the men almost shivered. But they were vastly refreshed, and the torture of their thirst was somewhat mitigated.

Now they could look perpendicularly into the square pit below them in the stone floor of the excavation. They were unable to see its bottom, for it went down into shadow beyond the westering sun-rays. But both could see the bizarre and inexplicable object which appeared to float immobile in air just below the mouth of the pit. They felt a creeping chill that was more insidious, more penetrant than the iciness of the unseen walls.

"Now I'm seeing things," said Langley.

"Guess I'm seeing them too," added Furnham.

The object was a long, hairless, light-grey body, lying horizontally, as if in some invisible sarcophagus or tomb. Standing erect, it would have been fully seven feet in height. It was vaguely human in its outlines, and possessed two legs and two arms; but the head was quite unearthly. The thing seemed to have a double set of high, concave ears, lined with perforations; and in place of nose, mouth and chin, there was a long, tapering trunk which lay coiled on the bosom of the monstrosity like a serpent. The eyes—or what appeared to be such—were covered by leathery, lashless and hideously wrinkled lids.

The thing lay rigid; and its whole aspect was that of a well-perserved corpse or mummy. Half in light and half in shadow, it hung amid the funereal, fathomless pit; and beneath it, at some little distance, as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the men seemed to perceive another and similar body.

Neither could voice the mad, eerie thoughts that assailed them. The mystery was too macabre and overwhelming and impossible. It was Langley who spoke at last.

"Say, do you suppose they are all dead?"

Before Furnham could answer, he and Langley heard a thin, shrill, exiguous sound, like the piping off some unearthly flute whose notes were almost beyond human audition. They could not determine its direction; for it seemed to come from one side and then from another as it continued. Its degree of apparent nearness or distance was also variable. It went on ceaselessly and monotonously, thrilling them with an eeriness as of untrod worlds, a terror as of uncharted dimensions. It seemed to fade away in remote ultramundane gulfs; and then, louder and clearer than before, the piping came from the air beside them.

Inexpressibly startled, the two men stared from side to side in an effort to locate the source of the sound. They could find nothing. The air was clear and still about them; and their view of the rocky slopes that rimmed the basin was blurred only by the dancing haze of heat.

The piping ceased, and was followed by a dead, uncanny silence. But Furnham and Langley had the feeling that someone or something was near them—a stealthy presence that lurked and crouched and drew closer till they could have shrieked aloud with the terror of suspense. They seemed to

wait amid the unrealities of delirium and mirage, haunted by some elusive, undeclared horror.

Tensely they peered and listened, but there was no sound or visual ostent. Then Langfey cried out, and fell heavily to the unseen floor, borne backward by the onset of a cold and tangible thing, resistless as the launching coils of an anaconda. He lay helpless, unable to move beneath the dead and fluid weight of the unknown incubus, which crushed down his limbs and body and almost benumbed him with an icy chill as of etheric space. Then something touched his throat, very lightly at first, and then with a pressure that deepened intolerably to a stabbing pain, as if he had been pierced by an icicle.

A black faintness swept upon him, and the pain seemed to recede as if the nerves that bore it to his brain were spun like lengthening gossamers across gulfs of anesthesia.

Furnham, in a momentary paralysis, heard the cry of his companion, and saw Langley fall and struggle feebly, to lie inert with closing eyes and whitening face, Mechanically, without realizing for some moments what had happened, he perceived that Langley's garments were oddly flattened and pressed down beneath an invisible weight. Then, from the hollow of Langley's neck, he saw the spurting of a thin rill of blood, which mounted straight in air for several inches, and vanished in a sort of red mist.

Bizarre, incoherent thoughts arose in Furnham's mind. It was all too incredible, too unreal. His brain must be wandering, it must have given way entirely…but something was attacking Langley—an invisible vampire of this invisible city.

He had retained his rifle. Now he stepped forward and stood beside the fallen man. His free hand, groping in the air, encountered a chill, clammy surface, rounded like the back of a stooping body. It numbed his fingertips even as he touched it. Then something seemed to reach out like an arm and hurl him violently backward.

Reeling and staggering, he managed to retain his balance and returned more cautiously. The blood still rose in a vanishing rill from Langley's throat. Estimating the position of the unseen attacker, Furnham raised his rifle and took careful aim, with the muzzle less than a yard away from its hidden mark.

The gun roared with deafening resonance, and its sound died away in slow echoes, as if repeated by a maze of walls. The blood ceased to rise from Langley's neck, and fell to a natural trickle. There was no sound, no manifestation of any kind from the thing that had assailed him. Furnham stood in doubt, wondering if his shot had taken effect. Perhaps the thing had been frightened away, perhaps it was still close at hand, and might leap upon him at any moment, or return to its prey.

He peered at Langley, who lay white and still. The blood was ceasing to flow from the tiny puncture. He stepped toward him, with the idea of trying to revive him, but was arrested by a strange circumstance. He saw that Langley's face and upper body were blurred by a grey mist that seemed to thicken and assume palpable outlines. It darkened apace, it took on solidity and form; and Furnham beheld the monstrous thing that lay prone between himself and his companion, with part of its fallen bulk still weighing upon Langley. From its inertness, and the bullet-wound in its side, whence oozed a viscid purple fluid, he felt sure that the thing was dead.

The monster was alien to all terrestrial biology—a huge, invertebrate body, formed like an elongated starfish, with the points ending in swollen tentacular limbs. It had a round, shapeless head with the curving, needle-tipped bill of some mammoth insect. It must have come from other planets or dimensions than ours. It was wholly unlike the mummified creature that floated in the pit below, and Furnham felt that it represented an inferior animal-like type. It was evidently composed of an unknown order of organic matter that became visible to human eyes only in death.

His brain was swamped by the mad enigma of it all; What was this place upon which he and Langley had stumbled? Was it an outpost of worlds beyond human knowledge or observation? What was the material of which these buildings had been wrought? Who were their builders? Whence had they come and what had been their purpose? Was the city of recent date or was it, perhaps, a sort of ruin, whose builders lay dead in its vaults—a ruin haunted only by the vampire monster that had assailed Langley?

Shuddering with repulsion at the dead monster, he started to drag the still-unconscious man from beneath the loathsome mass. He avoided touching the dark, semi-translucent body, which lapsed forward, quivering like a stiff jelly when he had pulled his companion away from it.

Like something very trivial and far away, he remembered the absurd quarrel which Langley had picked with him, and remembered his own resentment as part of a doubtful dream, now lost in the extra-human mystery of their surroundings. He bent over his comrade, anxiously, and saw that some of the natural tan was returning to the pale face and that the eyelids were begging to flutter. The blood had clotted on the tiny wound. Taking Langley's canteen, he poured the last of its contents between the owner's teeth.

In a few moments Langley was able to sit up. Furnham helped him to his feet, and the two began to cross their way from the crystal maze.

They found the doorway; and Furnham, still supporting the other, decided to retrace their course along the weird street by which they had started to cross the basin. They had gone but a few paces when they heard a faint, almost inaudible rustling in the air before them, together with a mysterious grating noise. The rustling seemed to spread and multiply on every hand, as if an invisible crowd were gathering; but the grating soon ceased.

They went on, slowly and cautiously, with a sense of imminent, uncanny peril. Langley was now strong enough to walk without assistance; and Furnham held his cocked rifle ready for instant use. The vague rustling sounds receded, but still encircled them.

Midway between the underlying rows of pits, they moved on toward the desert precipice, keeping side by side. A dozen paces on the cold, solid pavement, and then they stepped into empty air and landed several feet below with a terrific jar, on another hard surface.

It must have been the top of a flight of giant stairs; for, losing their balance, they both lurched and fell, and rolled downward along a series of similar surfaces, and lay stunned at the bottom.

Langley had been rendered unconscious by the fall; but Fornham was vaguely aware of several strange, dreamlike phenomena. He heard a faint, ghostly, sibilant rustling, he felt a light and clammy touch upon his face, and smelled an odor of suffocating sweetness, in which he seemed to sink as into an unfathomable sea. The rustling died to a vast and spatial silence; oblivion darkened above him; and he slid swiftly into nothingness.

It was night when Furnham awoke. His first impression was the white dazzle of a full moon shining in his eyes. Then he became aware that the

circle of the great orb was oddly distorted and broken, like a moon in some cubistic painting. All around and above him were bright, crystalline angles, crossing and intermingling—the outlines of a translucent architecture, dome on dome and wall on wall. As he moved his head, showers of ghostly irises—the lunar yellow and green and purple—fell in his eyes from the broken orb and vanished.

He saw that he was lying on a glass-like floor, which caught the light in moving sparkles. Langley, still unconscious, was beside him. Doubtless they were still in the mysterious oubliette down whose invisible stairs they had fallen. Far off, to one side, through a mélange of the transparent partitions, he could see the vague rocks of the Gobi, twisted and refracted in the same manner as the moon.

Why, he wondered, was the city now visible? Was its substance rendered perceptible, in a partial sort of way, by some unknown ray which existed in moonlight but not in the direct beams of the sun? Such an explanation sounded altogether too unscientific; but he could not think of any other at the moment.

Rising on his elbow, he saw the glassy outlines of the giant stairs down which he and Langley had plunged. A pale, diaphanous form, like a phantom of the mummified creature they had seen in the pit, was descending the stairs. It moved forward with fleet strides, longer than those of a man, and stooped above Furnham with its spectral trunk waving inquisitively and poising an inch or two from his face. Two round, phosphorescent eyes, emitting perceptible beams like lanterns, glowed solemnly in its head above the beginning of the proboscis.

The eyes seemed to transfix Furnham with their unearthly gaze. He felt that the light they emitted was flowing in a ceaseless stream into his own eyes—into his very brain. The light seemed to shape itself into images, formless and incomprehensible at first, but growing clearer and more coherent momently. Then, in some indescribable way, the images were associated with articulate words, as if a voice were speaking: words that he understood as one might understand the language of dreams.

“We mean you no harm,” the voice seemed to say. “But you have stumbled upon our city; and we cannot afford to let you escape. We do not wish to have our presence known to men.

“We have dwelt here for many ages. The Lob-nor desert was a fertile realm when we first established our city. We came to your world as fugitives from a great planet that once formed part of the solar system—a planet composed entirely of ultra-violet substances, which was destroyed in a terrible cataclysm. Knowing the imminence of the catastrophe, some of us were able to build a huge space-flier, in which we fled to the Earth. From the materials of the flier, and other materials we had brought along for the express purpose, we built our city, whose name, as well as it can be conveyed in human phonetics, is Ciis.

“The things of your world have always been plainly visible to us; and, in fact, due to our immense scale of perceptions, we probably see much that is not manifest to you. Also, we have no need of artificial light at any time. We discovered, however, at an early date, that we ourselves and our buildings were invisible to men. Strangely enough, our bodies undergo in death a degeneration of substance which brings them within the infra-violet range; and thus within the scope of your visual cognition.”

The voice seemed to pause, and Furnham realized that it had spoken only in his thought by a sort of telepathy. In his own mind, he tried to shape a question:

“What do you intend to do with us?”

Again he heard the still, toneless voice:

“We plan to keep you with us permanently. After you fell through the trap-door we had opened, we overpowered you with an anesthetic; and during your period of unconsciousness, which lasted many hours, we injected into your bodies a drug which has already affected your vision, rendering visible, to a certain degree, the ultra-violet substances that surround you. Repeated injections, which must be given slowly, will make these substances no less plain and solid to you than the materials of your own world. Also, there are other processes to which we intend to subject you…processes that will serve to adjust and acclimate you in all ways to your new surroundings.”

Behind Furnham’s weird interlocutor, several more fantasmal figures had descended the half-visible steps. One of them was stooping over Langley, who had begun to stir and would recover full consciousness in a few instants. Furnham sought to frame other questions, and received an immediate reply.

“The creature that attacked your companion was a domestic animal. We were busy in our laboratories at the time, and did not know of your presence till we heard the rifle shots.

“The flashes of light which you saw among our invisible walls on your arrival were due to some queer phenomenon of refraction. At certain angles the sunlight was broken or intensified by the molecular arrangement of the unseen substance.”

At this juncture Langley sat up, looking about him in a bewildered fashion.

“What the hell is all this, and where the hell are we?” he inquired as he peered from Furnham to the people of the city.

Furnham proceeded to explain, repeating the telepathic information he had just received. By the time he had ceased speaking, Langley himself appeared to become the recipient of some sort of mental reassurance from the phantom-like creature who had been Furnham’s interlocutor; for Langley stared at this being with a mixture of enlightenment and wonder in his expression.

Once more there came the still, super-auditory voice, fraught now with imperious command.

“Come with us. Your initiation into our life is to begin immediately. My name is Aispha—if you wish to have a name for me in your thoughts. We ourselves, communicating with each other without language, have little need for names; and their use is a rare formality among us. Our generic name, as a people, is the Tiisins.”

Furnham and Langley arose with an unquestioning alacrity, for which afterwards they could hardly account, and followed Aispha. It was as if a mesmeric compulsion had been laid upon them. Furnham noted, in an automatic sort of way, as they left the oubliette, that his rifle had vanished. No doubt it had been carefully removed during his period of insensibility.

He and Langley climbed the high steps with some difficulty. Queerly enough, considering their late fall, they found themselves quite free of stiffness and bruises; but at the time they felt no surprise—only a drugged acquiescence in all the marvels and perplexities of their situation.

They found themselves on the outer pavement, amid the bewildering outlines of the luminous buildings which towered above them with intersections of multiform crystalline curves and angles. Aispha went on

without pause, leading them toward the fantastic serpentine arch of an open doorway in one of the tallest of these edifices, whose pale domes and pinnacles were heaped in immaterial splendor athwart the zenith-nearing moon.

Four of the ultra-violet people—the companions of Aispha—brought up the rear. Aispha was apparently unarmed; but the others carried weapons like heavybladed and blunt-pointed sickles of glass or crystal Many others of this incredible race, intent on their own enigmatic affirs, were passing to and fro in the open street and through the portals of the unearthly buildings. The city was a place of silent and fantasmal activity.

At the end of the street they were following, before they passed through the arched entrance, Furnham and Langley saw the rock-strewn slope f the Lob-nor, which seemed to have taken on a queer filminess and insubstantiality in the moonlight. It occurred to Furnham, with a sort of weird shock, that his visual perception of earthly objects, as well as of the ultra-violet city, was being affected by the injections of which Aispha told him.

The building they now entered was full of apparatuses made in the form of distorted spheres and irregular disks and cubes, some of which seemed to change their outlines from moment to moment in a confusing manner. Certain of them appeared to concentrate the moonlight like ultra-powerful lenses, turning it to a fiery, blinding brilliance. Neither Furnham nor Langley could imagine the purpose of these devices; and no telepathic explanation was vouchsafed by Aispha or any of his companions.

As they went on into the building there was a queer sense of some importunate and subtle vibration in the air, which affected the men unpleasantly. They could not assign its source nor could they be sure whether their own perception of it was purely mental or came through the avenues of one or more of the physical senses. Somehow it was both disturbing and narcotic; and they sought instinctively to resist its influence.

The lower story of the edifice was seemingly one vast room. The strange apparatuses grew taller about them, rising as if in concentric tiers as they went on. In the huge dome above them, living rays of mysterious light appeared to cross and re-cross at all angles of incidence, weaving a bright, ever-changing web that dazzled the eye.

They emerged in a clear, circular space at the center of the building. Here ten or twelve of the ultra-violet people were standing about a slim column, perhaps five feet high, that culminated in a shallow basin-like formation. There was a glowing oval-shaped object in the basin, large as the egg of some extinct bird. From this object, numerous spokes of light extended horizontally in all directions, seeming to transfix the heads and bodies of those who stood in a loose ring about the column. Furnham and Langley became aware of a high, thin, humming noise which emanated from the glowing egg and was somehow inseparable from the spokes of light, as if the radiance had become audible.

Aispha paused facing the men; and a voice spoke in their minds.

"The glowing object is called the Doir. An explanation of its real nature and origin would be beyond your present comprehension. It is allied, however, to that range of substances which you would classify as minerals; and is one of a number of similar objects which existed in our former world. It generates a mighty force which is intimately connected with our life-principle; and the rays emanating from it serve us in place of food. If the Doir were lost or destroyed, the consequences would be serious; and our life-term, which normally is many thousand years, would be shortened for want of the nourishing and revivifying rays."

Fascinated, Furnham and Langley stared at the eggshaped orb. The humming seemed to grow louder; and the spokes of light lengthened and increased in number. The men recognized it now as the source of the vibration that had troubled and oppressed them. The effect was insidious, heavy, hypnotic, as if there were a living brain in the object that sought to overcome their volition and subvert their senses and their minds in some unnatural thralldom.

They heard the mental command of Aispha:

"Go forward and join those who partake of the luminous emanations of the Doir. We believe that by so doing you will, in course of time, become purged of your terrestrial grossness; that the very substance of your bodies may eventually be transformed into something not unlike that of our own; and your senses raised to a perceptional power such as we possess."

Half unwillingly, with an eerie consciousness of compulsion, the men started forward.

“I don’t like this,” said Furnham in a whisper to Langley. “I’m beginning to feel queer enough already.” Summoning his utmost will power he stopped short of the emanating rays and put out his hand to arrest Langley.

With dazzled eyes, they stood peering at the Doir. A cold, restless fire, alive with some nameless evil that was not akin to the evil of Earth, pulsated in its heart; and the long, sharp beams, quivering slightly, passed like javelins into the semi-crystalline bodies of the beings who stood immobile around the column.

“Hasten!” came the unvocal admonition of Aispha. “In a few moments the force in the Doir, which has a regular rhythm of ebb and flow, will begin to draw back upon itself. The rays will be retracted; and you will have to wait for many minutes before the return of the emanation.”

A quick, daring thought had occurred to Furnham. Eyeing the Doir closely, he had been impressed by its seeming fragility. The thing was evidently not attached to the basin in which it reposed; and in all likelihood it would shatter like glass if hurled or even dropped on the floor. He tried to suppress his thought, fearing that it would be read by Aispha or others of the ultra-violet people. At the same time, he sought to phrase, as innocently as possible, a mental question:

“What would happen if the Doir were broken?”

Instantly he received an impression of anger, turmoil and consternation in the mind of Aispha. His question, however, was apparently not answered; and it seemed that Aispha did not want to answer it—that he was concealing something too dangerous and dreadful to be revealed. Furnham felt, too, that Aispha was suspicious, had received an inkling of his own repressed thought.

It occurred to him that he must act quickly if at all. Nerving himself, he leaped forward through the ring of bodies about the Doir. The rays had already begun to shorten slightly; but he had the feeling of one who hurls himself upon an array of lance-points. There was an odd, indescribable sensation, as if he were being pierced by something that was both hot and cold; but neither the warmth nor the chill was beyond endurance. A moment, and he stood beside the column, lifting the glowing egg in his hands and poising it defiantly as he turned to face the ultra-violet people.

The thing was phenomenally light; and it seemed to burn his fingers and to freeze them at the same time. He felt a strange vertigo, an indescribable

confusion; but he succeeded in mastering it. The contact of the Doir might be deadlier to the human tissues than that of radium for aught he knew. He would have to take his chances. At any rate it would not kill him immediately; and if he played his cards with sufficient boldness and skill, he could make possible the escape of Langley—if not his own escape.

The ring of ultra-violet beings stood as if stupefied by his audacity. The retracting spokes of light were slowly drawing back into the egg; but Furnham himself was still impaled by them. His fingers seemed to be growing translucent where they clutched the weird ball.

He met the phosphoric gaze of Aispha, and heard the frantic thoughts that were pouring into his mind, not only from Aispha but from all the partakers of the Doir's luminous beams. Dread, unhuman threats, desperate injunctions to return the Doir to its pedestal, were being laid upon him. Rallying all his will, he defied them.

"Let us go free," he said, mentally addressing Aispha. "Give me back my weapon and permit my companion and me to leave your city. We wish you no harm; but we cannot allow you to detain us. Let us go or I will shatter the Doir—will smash it like an egg on the floor."

At the shaping of his destructive thought, a shudder passed among the semi-spectral beings; and he felt the dire fear that his threat had aroused in them. He had been right: the Doir was fragile; and some awful catastrophe, whose nature he could not quite determine, would ensue instantly upon its shattering.

Step by step, glancing frequently about to see that no one approached him by stealth from behind, Furnham returned to Langley's side. The Tiisins drew back from him in evident terror. All the while he continued to issue his demands and comminations:

"Bring the rifle quickly…the weapon you took from me…and give it into my companion's hands. Let us go without hindrance or molestation—or I will drop the Doir. When we are outside the city, one of you—one only—shall be permitted to approach us, and I will deliver the Doir to him."

One of the Tiisins left the group to return in less than a minute with Furnham's Winchester. He handed it to Langley, who inspected the weapon carefully and found that it had not been damaged or its loading or mechanism tampered with in any way. Then, with the ultra-violet creatures following them in manifest perturbation, Furnham and Langley made their

way from the building and started along the open street in the general direction (as Langley estimated from the compass he carried) of the Tarim River.

They went on amid the fantastic towering of the crystalline piles; and the people of the city, called as if by some unworded summons, poured from the doorways in an ever-swelling throng and gathered behind them There was no active demonstration of any overt kind; but both the men were increasingly aware of the rage and consternation that had been aroused by Furnham's audacious theft of the Doir—a theft that seemed to be regarded in the light of actual blasphemy.

The hatred of the Tiisins, like a material radiation—dark, sullen, stupefying, stultifying, beat upon them at every step. It seemed to dog their brains and their feet like some viscid medium of nightmare; and their progession toward the Gobi slope became painfully slow and tedious.

Before them, from one of the buildings, a tentacled, starfish monster, like the thing that had assailed Langley, emerged and lay crouching in the street as if to dispute their passage. Raising its evil beak, it glared with filmy eyes, but slunk away from their approach as if at the monition of its owners.

Furnham and Langley, passing it with involuntary shivers of repugnance, went on. The air was oppressed with alien, unformulable menace. They felt an abnormal drowsiness creeping upon them. There was an unheard, narcotic music, which sought to overcome their vigilance, to beguile them into slumber.

Furnham's fingers grew numb with the unknown radiations of the Doir, though the sharp beams of light, by accelerative degrees, had withdrawn into its center, leaving only a formless misty glow that filled the weird orb. The thing seemed latent with terrible life and power. The bones of his transparent hand were outlined against it like those of a skeleton.

Looking back, he saw that Aispha followed closely, walkiag in advance of the other Tiisins. He could not read the thoughts of Aispha as formerly. It was as if a blank, dark wall had been built up. Somehow he had a premonition of evil—of danger and treachery in some form which he could not understand or imagine.

He and Langley came to the end of the street, where the ultra-violet pavement joined itself to the desert acclivity. As they began their ascent of the slope both men realized that their visual powers had indeed been

affected by the injection treatment of the Tiisins; for the soil seemed to glow beneath them, faintly translucent; and the boulders were like semi-crystalline masses, whose inner structure they could see dimly.

Aispha followed them on the slope; but the other people of Ciis, as had been stipulated by Furnham, paused at the juncture of their streets and buildings with the infra-violet substances of Earth.

After they had gone perhaps fifty yards on the gentle acclivity, Furnham came to a pause and waited for Aispha, hoIding out the Doir at arm's length. Somehow he had a feeling that it was unwise to return the mystic egg; but he would keep his promise, since the people of Ciis had kept their part of the bargain so far.

Aispha took the Doir from Furnham's hands; but his thoughts, whatever they were, remained carefully shrouded. There was a sense of something ominous and sinister about him as he turned and went back down the slope with the fiery egg shining through his body like a great watchful eye. The beams of light were beginning to emanate from its center once more. The two men, looking back ever and anon, resumed their journey. Ciis glimmered below them like the city of a mirage in the moonlit hollow. They saw the ultraviolet people crowding to await Aispha at the end of their streets.

Then, as Aispha neared his fellows two rays of cold, writhing fire leaped forth from the base of a tower that glittered like glass at the city's verge. Clinging to the ground, the rays ran up the slope with the undulant motion of pythons, following Langley and Furnham at a speed that would soon overtake them.

"They're double crossing us!" warned Furnham. He caught the Winchester from Langley, dropped to his knees and aimed carefully, drawing a bead on the luminous orb of the Doir through the spectral form of Aispha, who had now reached the city and was about to enter the waiting throng.

"Run!" he called to Langley. "I'll make them pay for their treachery; and perhaps you can get away in the meanwhile."

He pulled the trigger, missing Aispha but dropping at least two of the Tiisins who stood near the Doir. Again, steadily, he drew bead, while the rays from the tower serpentined onward, pale, chill and deadly-looking, till they were almost at his feet. Even as he aimed, Aispha took refuge in the

foremost ranks of the crowd, through whose filmy bodies the Doir still glowed.

This time the high-powered bullet found its mark, though it must have passed through more than one of the ultra-violet beings before reaching Aispha and the mystic orb.

Furnham had hardly known what the result would be, but he felt sure that some sort of catastrophe would ensue the destruction of the Doir. What really happened was incalculable and almost beyond description. Before the Doir could fall from the hands of its stricken bearer, it seemed to expand in a rushing wheel of intense light, revolving as it grew, and blotting out the form of the ultra-violet people in the foreground. With awful velocity, the wheel struck the nearer buildings, which appeared to soar and vanish like towers of fading mirage. There was no audible explosion—no sound of any kind—only that silent, ever-spinning, ever-widening disk of light that threatened to involve by swift degrees the whole extent of Ciis.

Gazing spellbound, Furnham had almost forgotten the serpentine rays. Too late he saw that one of them was upon him. He leaped back, but the thing caught him, coiling about his limbs and body like an anaconda. There was a sensation of icy cold, of horrible constriction; and then, helpless, he found that the strange beam of force was dragging him back down the slope toward Ciis, while its fellow went on in pursuit of the fleeing Langley.

In the meanwhile the spreading disk of fire had reached the tower from which the ray emanated. Suddenly, Furnham was free—the serpentine beams had both vanished. He stood rooted to the spot in speechless awe; and Langley, returning down the hill, also paused, watching the mighty circle of light that seemed to fill the entire basin at their feet with a soundless vortex of destruction.

“My God!” cried Furnham after a brief interval. “Look what’s happening to the slope.”

As if the force of the uncanny explosion were now extending beyond Ciis, boulders and masses of earth began to rise in air before the white, glowing maelstron, and sailed in slow, silent levitation toward the men.

Furnham and Langley started to run, stumbling up the slope, and were overtaken by something that lifted them softly, buoyantly, irresistibly, with a strange feeling of utter weightlessness, and bore them like windwafted leaves or feathers through the air. They saw the bouldered crest of the

acclivity flowing far beneath them; and then they were floating, floating, ever higher in the moonlight, above leagues of dim desert. A faintness came upon them both—a vague nausea—an illimitable vertigo; and slowly, somewhere in that incredible flight, they lapsed into unconsciousness.

The moon had fallen low, and its rays were almost horizontal in Furnham's eyes when he awoke. An utter confusion possessed him at first; and his circumstances were more than bewildering. He was lying on a sandy slope, among scattered shrubs, meager and stunted; and Langley was reclining not far away. Raising himself a little, he saw the white and reedfringed surface of a river—which could be no other than the Tarim—at the slope's bottom. Half incredulous, he realized that the force of the weird explosion had carried Langley and himself many miles and had deposited them, apparently unhurt, beside the goal of their desert wandering!

Furnham rose to his feet, feeling a queer lightness and unsteadiness. He took a tentative step—and landed four or five feet away. It was as if he had lost half his normal weight. Moving with great care he went over to Langley, who had now started to sit up. He was reassured to find that his eye-sight was becoming normal again; for he perceived merely a faint glowing in the objects about him. The sand and boulders were comfortably solid; and his own hands were no longer translucent.

"Gosh!" he said to Langley, "That was some explosion. The force that was liberated by the shattering of the Doir must have done something to the gravity of all surrounding objects. I guess the city of Ciis and its people must have gone back into outer space; and even the infra-violet substances about the city must have been more or less degravitated. But I guess the effect is wearing off as far as you and I are concerned—otherwise we'd be traveling still."

Langley got up and tried to walk, with the same disconcerting result that had characterized Furnham's attempt. He mastered his limbs and his equilibrium after a few experiments.

"I still feel like a sort of dirigible," he commented. "Say, I think we'd better leave this out of our report to the museum. A city, a people, all invisible, in the heart of the Lob-nor—that would be too much for scientific credibility."

"I agree with you," said Furnham, "the whole business would be too fantastic, outside of a super-scientific story. In fact," he added a little

maliciously, “it’s even more incredible than the existence of the ruins of Kobar.”

MOTHER OF TOADS

***Weird Tales*, July 1938**

"Why must you always hurry away, my little one?"

The voice of Mere Antoinette, the witch, was an amorous croaking. She ogled Pierre, the apothecary's young apprentice, with eyes full-orbed and unblinking as those of a toad. The folds beneath her chin swelled like the throat of some great batrachian. Her huge breasts, pale as frog-bellies, bulged from her torn gown as she leaned toward him.

He gave no answer; and she came closer, till he saw in the hollow of those breasts a moisture glistening like the dew of marshes…like the slime of some amphibian…a moisture that seemed always to linger there.

Her voice, raucously coaxing, persisted. "Stay awhile tonight, my pretty orphan. No one will miss you in the village. And your master will not mind." She pressed against him with shuddering folds of fat. With her short flat fingers, which gave almost the appearance of being webbed, she seized his hand and drew it to her bosom.

Pierre wrenched the hand away and drew back discreetly. Repelled, rather than abashed, he averted his eyes. The witch was more than twice his age, and her charms were too uncouth and unsavory to tempt him for an instant. Also, her repute was such as to have nullified the attractions of a younger and fairer sorceress. Her witchcraft had made her feared among the peasantry of that remote province, where belief in spells and philters was still common. The people of Averoigne called her La Mere des Crapauds, Mother of Toads, a name given for more than one reason. Toads swarmed innumerably about her hut; they were said to be her familiars, and dark tales were told concerning their relationship to the sorceress, and the duties they performed at her bidding. Such tales were all the more readily believed because of those batrachian features that had always been remarked in her aspect.

The youth disliked her, even as he disliked the sluggish, abnormally large toads on which he had sometimes trodden in the dusk, upon the path between her hut and the village of Les Hiboux. He could hear some of these

creatures croaking now; and it seemed, weirdly, that they uttered half-articulate echoes of the witch's words.

It would be dark soon, he reflected. The path along the marshes was not pleasant by night, and he felt doubly anxious to depart. Still without replying to Mere Antionette's invitation, he reached for the black triangular vial she had set before him on her greasy table. The vial contained a philter of curious potency which his master, Alain le Dindon, had sent him to procure. Le Dindon,the village apothecary, was wont to deal surreptitiously in certain dubious medicaments supplied by the witch; and Pierre had often gone on such errands to her osier-hidden hut.

The old apothecary, whose humor was rough and ribald, had sometimes rallied Pierre concerning Mere Antoinette's preference for him. "Some night, my lad, you will remain with her," he had said. "Be careful, or the big toad will crush you." Remembering this gibe, the boy flushed angrily as he turned to go.

"Stay," insisted Mere Antoinette. "The fog is cold on the marshes; and it thickens apace. I knew that you were coming, and I have mulled for you a goodly measure of the red wine of Ximes."

She removed the lid from an earthen pitcher and poured its steaming contents into a large cup. The purplish-red wine creamed delectably, and an odor of hot, delicious spices filled the hut, overpowering the less agreeable odors from the simmering cauldron, the half-dried newts, vipers, bat-wings and evil, nauseous herbs hanging on the walls, and the reek of the black candles of pitch and corpse-tallow that burned always, by noon or night, in that murky interior.

"I'll drink it," said Pierre, a little grudgingly. "That is, if it contains nothing of your own concoction."

"'Tis naught but sound wine, four seasons old, with spices of Arabia," the sorceress croaked ingratiatingly. "'Twill warm your stomach…and…" She added something inaudible as Pierre accepted the cup.

Before drinking, he inhaled the fumes of the beverage with some caution but was reassured by its pleasant smell. Surely it was innocent of any drug, any philter brewed by the witch: for, to his knowledge, her preparations were all evil-smelling.

Still, as if warned by some premonition, he hesitated. Then he remembered that the sunset air was indeed chill; that mists had gathered

furtively behind him as he came to Mere Antoinette's dwelling. The wine would fortify him for the dismal return walk to Les Hiboux. He quaffed it quickly and set down the cup. "Truly, it is good wine," he declared. "But I must go now."

Even as he spoke, he felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of the alcohol, of the spices…of something more ardent than these. It seemed that his voice was unreal and strange, falling as if from a height above him, the warmth grew, mounting within him like a golden flame fed by magic oils. His blood, a seething torrent, poured tumultuously and more tumultuously through his members.

There was a deep soft thundering in his ears, a rosy dazzlement in his eyes. Somehow the hut appeared to expand, to change luminously about him. He hardly recognized its squalid furnishings, its litter of baleful oddments, on which a torrid splendor was shed by the black candles, tipped with ruddy fire, that towered and swelled gigantically into the softgloom His blood burned as with the throbbing flame of the candles.

It came to him, for an instant, that all this was a questionable enchantment, a glamor wrought by the witch's wine. Fear was upon him and he wished to flee. Then, close beside him, he saw Mere Antoinette.

Briefly he marvelled at the change that had befallen her. Then fear and wonder were alike forgotten, together with his old repulsion. He knew why the magic warmth mounted ever higher and hotter within him; why his flesh glowed like the ruddy tapers.

The soiled skirt she had worn lay at her feet, and she stood naked as Lilith, the first witch. The lumpish limbs and body had grown voluptuous; the pale, thick-lipped mouth enticed him with a promise of ampler kisses than other mouths couldyield. The pits of her short round arms, the concave of her ponderously drooping breasts, the heavy creases and swollen rondures of flanks and thighs, all were fraught with luxurious allurement.

"Do you like me now, my little one?" she questioned.

This time he did not draw away but met her with hot, questing hands when she pressed heavily against him. Her limbs were cool and moist; her breasts yielded like the turf-mounds above a bog. Her body was white and wholly hairless; but here and there he found curious roughnesses…like those on the skin of a toad…that somehow sharpened his desire instead of repelling it.

She was so huge that his fingers barely joined behind her, His two hands, together, were equal only to the cupping of a single breast. But the wine had filled his blood with a philterous ardor.

She led him to her couch beside the hearth where a great cauldron boiled mysteriously, sending up its fumes in strange-twining coils that suggested vague and obscene figures. The couch was rude and bare. But the flesh of the sorceress was like deep, luxurious cushions…

* * * *

Pierre awoke in the ashy dawn, when the tall black tapers had dwindled down and had melted limply in their sockets. Sick and confused, he sought vainly to remember where he was or what he had done. Then, turning a little, he saw beside him on the couch a thing that was like some impossible monster of ill dreams; a toadlike form, large as a fat woman. Its limbs were somehow like a woman's arms and legs. Its pale, warty body pressed and bulged against him, and he felt the rounded softness of something that resembled a breast.

Nausea rose within him as memory of that delirious night returned; Most foully he had been beguiled by the witch, and had succumbed to her evil enchantments.

It seemed that an incubus smothered him, weighing upon all his limbs and body. He shut his eyes, that he might no longer behold the loathsome thing that was Mere Antoinette in her true semblance. Slowly, with prodigious effort, he drew himself away from the crushing nightmare shape. It did not stir or appear to waken; and he slid quickly from the couch.

Again, compelled by a noisome fascination, he peered at the thing on the couch—and saw only the gross form of Mere Antoinette. Perhaps his impression of a great toad beside him had been but an illusion, a half-dream that lingered after slumber. He lost something of his nightmarish horror; but his gorge still rose in a sick disgust, remembering the lewdness to which he had yielded.

Fearing that the witch might awaken at any moment and seek to detain him, he stole noiselessly from the hut. It was broad daylight, but a cold, hueless mist lay everywhere, shrouding the reedy marshes, and hanging like a ghostly curtain on the path he must follow to Les Hiboux. Moving and

seething always, the mist seemed to reach toward him with intercepting fingers as he started homeward. He shivered at its touch, he bowed his head and drew his cloak closer around him.

Thicker and thicker the mist swirled, coiling, writhing endlessly, as if to bar Pierre's progress. He could discern the twisting, narrow path for only a few paces in advance. It was hard to find the familiar landmarks, hard to recognize the osiers and willows that loomed suddenly before him like gray phantoms and faded again into the white nothingness as he went onward. Never had he seen such fog: it was like the blinding, stifling fumes of a thousand witch-stirred cauldrons.

Though he was not altogether sure of his surroundings, Pierre thought that he had covered half the distance to the village. Then, all at once, he began to meet the toads. They were hidden by the mist till he came close upon them. Misshapen, unnaturally big and bloated, they squatted in his way on the little footpath or hopped sluggishly before him from the pallid gloom on either hand.

Several struck against his feet with a horrible and heavy flopping. He stepped unaware upon one of them, and slipped in the squashy noisomeness it had made, barely saving himself from a headlong fall on the bog's rim. Black, miry water gloomed close beside him as he staggered there.

Turning to regain his path, he crushed others of the toads to an abhorrent pulp under his feet. The marshy soil was alive with them. They flopped against him from the mist, striking his legs, his bosom, his very face with their clammy bodies. They rose up by scores like a devil-driven legion. It seemed that there was a malignance, an evil purpose in their movements, in the buffeting of their violent impact. He could make no progress on the swarming path, but lurched to and fro, slipping blindly, and shielding his face with lifted hands. He felt an eery consternation, an eldrich horror. It was as if the nightmare of his awakening in the witch's hut had somehow returned upon him.

The toads came always from the direction of Les Hiboux, as if to drive him back toward Mere Antoinette's dwelling. They bounded against him like a monstrous hail, like missiles flung by unseen demons. The ground was covered by them, the air was filled with their hurtling bodies. Once, he nearly went down beneath them.

Their number seemed to increase, they pelted him in a noxious storm. He gave way before them, his courage broke, and he started to run at random, without knowing that he had left the safe path. Losing all thought of direction, in his frantic desire to escape from those impossible myriads, he plunged on amid the dim reeds and sedges, over ground that quivered gelatinously beneath him. Always at his heels he heard the soft, heavy flopping of the toads; and sometimes they rose up like a sudden wall to bar his way and turn him aside. More than once, they drove him back from the verge of hidden quagmires into which he would otherwise have gallen. It was as if they were herding him deliberately and concertedly to a destined goal.

Now, like the lifting of a dense curtain, the mist rolled away, and Pierre saw before him in a golden dazzle of morning sunshine the green, thick-growing osiers that surrounded Mere Antoinette's hut. The toads had all disappeared, though he could have sworn that hundreds of them were hopping close about him an instant previously. With a feeling of helpless fright and panic, he knew that he was still within the witch's toils; that the toads were indeed her familiars, as so many people believed them to be. They had prevented his escape, and had broughthimback to the foul creature…whether woman, batrachian, or both…who was known as The Mother of Toads.

Pierre's sensations were those of one who sinks momently deeper into some black and bottomless quicksand. He saw the witch emerge from the hut and come toward him. Her thick fingers, with pale folds of skin between them like the beginnings of a web, were stretched and flattened on the steaming cup that she carried. A sudden gust of wind arose as if from nowhere, lifting the scanty skirts of Mere Antoinette about her fat thighs, and bearing to Pierre's nostrils the hot, familiar spices of the drugged wine.

"Why did you leave so hastily, my little one~" There was an amorous wheedling in the very tone of the witch's question. "I should not have let you go without another cup of the good red wine, mulled and spiced for the warming of your stomach… See, I have prepared it for you…knowing that you would return."

She came very close to him as she spoke, leering and sidling, and held the cup toward his lips. Pierre grew dizzy with the strange fumes and turned

his head away. It seemed that a paralyzing spell had seized his muscles, for the simple movement required an immense effort.

His mind, however, was still clear, and the sick revulsion of that nightmare dawn returned upon him. He saw again the great toad that had lain at his side when he awakened.

"I will not drink your wine," he said firmly. "You are a foul witch, and I loathe you. Let me go.

"Why do you loathe me?" croaked Mere Antoinette. "You loved me yesternight. I can give you all that other women give…and more."

"You are not a woman," said Pierre. "You are a big toad. I saw you in your true shape this morning. I'd rather drown in the marsh-waters than sleep with you again."

An indescribable change came upon the sorceress before Pierre had finished speaking. The leer slid from her thick and pallid features, leaving them blankly inhuman for an instant. Then her eyes bulged and goggled horribly, and her whole body appeared to swell as if inflated with venom.

"Go, then!" she spat with a guttural virulence. "But you will soon wish that you had stayed…"

The queer paralysis had lifted from Pierre's muscles. It was as if the injunction of the angry witch had served to revoke an insidious, half-woven spell. With no parting glance or word, Pierre turned from her and fled with long, hasty steps, almost running, on the path to Les Hiboux.

He had gone little more than a hundred paces when the fog began to return. It coiled shoreward in vast volumes from the marshes, it poured like smoke from the very ground at his feet. Almost instantly, the sun dimmed to a wan silver disk and disappeared. The blue heavens were lost in the pale and seething voidness overhead. The path before Pierre was blotted out till he seemed to walk on the sheer rim of a white abyss, that moved with him as he went.

Like the clammy arms of specters, with death-chill fingers that clutched and caressed, the weird mists drew closer still about Pierre. They thickened in his nostrils and throat, they dripped in a heavy dew from his garments. They choked him with the fetor of rank waters and putrescent ooze…and a stench as of liquefying corpses that had risen somewhere to the surface amid the fen.

Then, from the blank whiteness, the toads assailed Pierre in a surging, solid wave that towered above his head and swept him from the dim path with the force of falling seas as it descended. He went down, splashing and floundering, into water that swarmed with the numberless batrachians. Thick slime was in his mouth and nose as he struggled to regain his footing. The water, however, was only knee-deep, and the bottom, though slippery and oozy, supported him with little yielding when he stood erect.

He discerned indistinctly through the mist the nearby margin from which he had fallen. But his steps were weirdly and horribly hampered by the toad-seething waters when he strove to reach it. Inch by inch, with a hopeless panic deepening upon him, he fought toward the solid shore. The toads leaped and tumbled about him with a dizzying eddylike motion. They swirled like a viscid undertow around his feet and shins. They swept and swelled in great loathsome undulations against his retarded knees.

However, he made slow and painful progress, till his outstretched fingers could almost grasp the wiry sedges that trailed from the low bank lhen, from that mist-bound shore, there fell and broke upon him a second deluge of those demoniac toads; and Pierre was borne helplessly backward into the filthy waters.

Held down by the piling and crawling masses, and drowning in nauseous darkness at the thick-oozed bottom, he clawed feebly at his assailants. For a moment, ere oblivion came, his fingers found among them the outlines of a monstrous form that was somehow toadlike…but large and heavy as a fat woman. At the last, it seemed to him that two enormous breasts were crushed closely down upon his face.

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